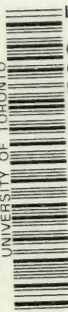


UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO



3 1761 00076568 5



The J. C. Saul Collection
of
Nineteenth Century
English Literature

Purchased in part
through a contribution to the
Library Funds made by the
Department of English in
University College.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2008 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

Life and Letters

72

152

Works by the Same Author

VERSE

- ✓ POEMS. First Series.
- ✓ THE BIRDS AND OTHER POEMS.
- ✓ THE MOON: A Poem.
- ✓ THE MOON. Special Limited Edition
De Luxe.

PARODIES

- COLLECTED PARODIES.
- TRICKS OF THE TRADE.

PROSE

- ✓ LIFE AND LETTERS.
- ✓ THE GOLD TREE.
- BOOKS IN GENERAL. By Solomon
Eagle.
- ✓ BOOKS IN GENERAL. Second Series.
By Solomon Eagle.

74k.2

Life and Letters

Essays by J. C. Squire

376000
27.2.40

London: Hodder & Stoughton
Limited

PR
6037
Q5L5
1920
cop. 2

TO
EDWARD SHANKS

Note

THE enclosed are a selection from articles published weekly in *Land and Water* since early in 1917.

J. C. S.

Contents

- Childhood in Retrospect, 11
Keats's Fame, 18
Short Cuts to Helicon, 26
Edward Thomas, 33
The Wallet of Kai-Lung, 40
One, 47
Anatole France, 52
Natural Writing, 59
Secret History, 66
Mr. Asquith as Author, 76
The Infinitives that were Split, 83
Dr. Johnson, 90
A Puzzle, 97
Tom Thumb, 104
Sidelights on the Victorians, 111
Sir Charles Dilke, 118
The Utopian Satirist, 125
Jane Austen's Centenary, 132
Mr. Conrad's Masterpiece, 139
Four Papers on Shakespeare—
 I. Shakespeare's Workmanship, 146
 II. The Blackamoor, 152
 III. Hamlet, 159
 IV. Shakespeare's Sonnets, 165
The Great Unfinished, 173
Walt Whitman, 180

Contents

Rohmer, 187

Pope, 194

God Save the King, 201

Midshipman Easy, 208

Jane Cave, 215

Galleries, 222

Initials, 229

Recitation in Public, 236

Humane Education, 243

A Subject, 250

Goats and Humour, 257

A Corner of Old England, 271

A Poet's Pedigree, 278

Rabelais, 285

Fame after Death, 293

CHILDHOOD IN RETROSPECT

MR. W. H. HUDSON is known to many—though not to as many as he should be—as one of the closest and most affectionate living students of birds and beasts, and at the same time as the possessor of a simple and excellent English style. *A Shepherd's Life* and the studies of wild life at the Land's End and in La Plata have frequently been described as the nearest things we have to the work of Richard Jefferies, and the description is justified. Mr. Hudson has now, in a book boldly entitled *Far Away and Long Ago*, written a history of his early years. A succession of old scenes came back to him very clearly during a convalescence, and he wrote them down while they were fresh. He has made with them his best book.

For a book of the kind, it is very diversified. The tone is not varied, the writing glides smoothly on, and the details, whatever their nature, are harmonised and made coherent by that golden atmosphere, that even transparent glaze rather, that gives kinship to all things remembered from childhood. But in its material surroundings his was no ordinary

Life and Letters

English childhood, and he was not an ordinary child. He was born, in the middle of the last century, on the pampas, where his amiable and cultivated parents raised sheep amidst very rough surroundings. The young republic was dominated by the Dictator Rosas, "the Nero of South America"; the Hudsons' servants and most of their neighbours were wild gauchos, reckless and cruel, whose festive evenings commonly ended in fights with knives. At an early age he saw a beaten army straggle past his house and murder was a word soon familiar to him. He gives many sketches of the men and women of that day, some of them noble, others utterly vile, but all picturesque in raiment and individual in action; and the strangeness of the natives is heightened by their contrast with the few early English or Scotch settlers still clinging to their native conventions. Into that strange community, living in low estancias scattered over the almost treeless plain still full of birds and beasts, strange vagrants wandered, always on horseback. One was an English schoolmaster who would stay at a place for months, and then lose his temper and his job, mount his horse, and head for the horizon. Another was the most remarkable beggar in literature :

"He wore a pair of gigantic shoes, about a foot broad at the toes, made out of thick cowhide, with the hair on; and on his head

Childhood in Retrospect

was a tall rimless cowhide hat shaped like an inverted flower-pot. His bodily covering was, however, the most extraordinary: the outer garment, if garment it can be called, resembled a very large mattress in size and shape, with the ticking of innumerable pieces of raw hide sewn together. It was about a foot in thickness and stuffed with sticks, stones, hard lumps of clay, rams' horns, bleached bones, and other hard, heavy objects; it was fastened round him with straps of hide, and reached nearly to the ground."

This freak does not seem so singular in his surroundings as out of them. And there are many others, including a lady who, when St. Antony did not send her fine weather, let his image down a well to discover how he liked the wet. They pass over the pages in sequence, come and go; none stay but the family, who linger in the background, a dim but friendly group.

Mr. Hudson's passion for nature, nourished by his mother, developed early. The naturalist who was to spend years watching English rooks and starlings, began by staring in fascination at scissor-tail tyrant-birds, ostriches and flamingoes. At an age when his literary contemporaries were, at most, ferreting for rabbits, he was trying to catch an armadillo by the tail—the beast, which escaped by burrowing, threatening to drag him into an

Life and Letters

early tomb if he did not let go. He has none of those astounding stories with which he has sometimes tested one's capacity for belief—such as that, told five or six years ago, about the swan which was in love with a trout, followed it daily all over the lake, and finally attacked the angler who caught it. But he saw a dog which dived and caught fish; and he came upon two deer, a ring of does around them, fighting with horns which locked, and never unlocked when they died. He would lie awake in the darkness listening to the snakes sliding and whispering under the floor: snakes fascinated him, with their menacing movements and their rich lines. There were green and grey snakes, green and velvet-black snakes, snakes with bellies barred bright blue and crimson; and he found, and several times tracked down, an unknown velvet-black snake, six feet long, which once drew its heavy length right over his foot as he stood looking into a tree. But it is of the birds and the flowers, and the few and precious groves of trees, that he writes most. Of birds, he must mention hundreds; and the most beautiful of all, he says, were the flamingoes. He describes, with emotion but without laboured effort, how, as a child of six, he walked over a league of meadow, and came suddenly, to a wide water where multitudes of birds—wild duck, swans, ibises, herons, and spoonbills—waded or swam; and nearest “three im-

Childhood in Retrospect

mensely tall white and rose-coloured birds, wading solemnly in a row a yard or so apart from one another . . . My delight was intensified when the leading bird stood still and, raising his head and long neck aloft, opened and shook his wings. For the wings, when open, were of a glorious crimson colour, and the bird was to me the most angel-like creature on earth." He describes later sights of flamingoes, standing reflected in a still river at sunset, flying low over blue water in a long crimson line; but the most beautiful picture he paints is not here, but is to be found in a decorative effect which, in its way, not all nature could excel. There was an orchard of great old peach-trees, with black trunks, standing on a carpet of grass, covered with mounds of rosy-pink blossoms. In these trees thousands of little yellow birds often sat and sang; and one day a flock of small parrakeets came and sat on the twigs, amid the blossom. Such a picture is fragrant in the memory for a lifetime.

The setting of Mr. Hudson's tale is exotic; yet the history is familiar; for, where obstinate calamities have been avoided, it is only in inessentials that men's early memories differ. The country of which Mr. Hudson writes is not Argentina; it is the country of childhood, a farther and more beautiful place; and there all men have lived, though not in all men are its impressions equally deep or its influences

Life and Letters

equally living, and few make a habit of revisiting it in imagination. A village street, a church, elms, farmyards and great hollow barns, a blacksmith's forge, meadows with cows, a reedy stream; a fishing-harbour, where nets are dried on the hill and the gulls forage the mud for offal at low tide; a rusty industrial suburb, builders' yards, geraniums, a black canal, and green and red signals in the night: they are all the substantial provinces of that unsubstantial land; the air of them, the speech, the manners, are the same. There were birds, animals, bearded old men, and a slight reticent little girl with pale complexion and flying hair. Aksakoff on the steppes beyond the Volga, Goethe remembering the gabled streets and berobed councillors of Imperial Frankfort, they are looking back on the same world: a world extraordinarily vivid and picturesque, where the strong were more strong, the sweet more angelic, the quaint more odd; where the young newcomer first learned to know in others brutality and love, in himself curiosity and silence, fear, cunning, sympathy, ambition, courage, and cowardice, the desire and dread of danger, resentment, fierce grief, and despair; where scents were acute to the nostrils, where bright colours were first seen, and the wonders of the elements first learned, the sun, the moon, clouds, sky, and stars, trees, flowers and water in its various forms, the wide whiteness of snow, the

Childhood in Retrospect

terror of thunder at night, the steely persistence of heavy rains. Time was long there, before we bothered to count or needed to use the minutes, and under the shadow of powerful authority we enjoyed a liberty like no other liberty; new things came unendingly and adventure was all around. We did not know then that we lived there, and our elders usually forgot it; but we know thirty years afterwards. The knowledge makes the contemplative sort of artist, in whom the mood of retrospection often becomes dominant, desire to set it down before he dies and one reporter has been lost. From this cause many beautiful books have come; and the book that has not yet been written will be the loveliest and saddest in the world.

KEATS'S FAME

A HUNDRED years ago Keats's first volume of poetry was published; and Sir Sidney Colvin's new *Life*, which, humanly speaking, must be the definitive biography of the poet, is a "centenary tribute," which renders any other unnecessary. That first volume, which appeared when Keats was twenty-one, contained, as every critic has observed, much immature and much bad work. Lines like

*Of him whose name to ev'ry heart's a solace
High-minded and unbending William Wallace.*

which Sir Sidney Colvin does *not* quote, beat on their own ground Leigh Hunt's

*The two divinest things the world has got
A lovely woman in a rural spot,*

which he does quote. But when everything possible has been extracted to illustrate the tremendous progress Keats made in two years, the fact remains that there were scattered everywhere in the book, passages which might

Keats's Fame

have shown any one but a dolt that this was a great poet in the making, and that it contained, moreover, *To One who has been long in city pent*; *Sleep and Poetry*, and, above all, the Sonnet on Chapman's *Homer*.

The reception that it got is notorious. "The book," says Cowden Clarke, "might have emerged in Timbuctoo with far stronger chance of fame and appreciation. The whole community, as if by compact, seemed determined to know nothing about it." This is a slight exaggeration. There was a little sale; and this is how the publisher alludes to it:

"By far the greater number of persons who have purchased it from us have found fault with it in such plain terms, that we have in many cases offered to take it back rather than be annoyed with the ridicule which has, time after time, been showered upon it. In fact, it was only on Saturday last that we were under the mortification of having our own opinion of its merits flatly contradicted by a gentleman, who told us he considered it 'no better than a take-in.'"

The critics however, said little about it (except that Keats was unclean); their efforts were reserved for *Endymion*, which came out next year. With this the friends of "that amiable but infatuated young bardling, Mister John Keats," could no longer complain that he was

Life and Letters

entirely ignored. *Blackwood* led the pack, the *Quarterly* and the *British Critic* following. Here is *Blackwood's* peroration :

“ And now, good morrow to the ‘ Muses’ son of Promise ’ ; as for the feats he yet ‘ may do,’ as we do not pretend to say like himself, ‘ Muse of my native land am I inspired,’ we shall adhere to the safe old rule of *pauca verba*. We venture to make one small prophecy, that his bookseller will not a second time venture £50 upon anything he can write. It is a better and a wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet ; so back to the shop Mr. John, back to ‘ plasters, pills, and ointment boxes,’ etc. But, for Heaven’s sake, young Sangrado, be a little more sparing of extenuatives and soporifics in your practice than you have been in your poetry.”

This passage is well known. What is not so generally realised is the slowness with which the appreciation of him spread even after his death. He had died, and Shelley’s great elegy on him was under review, when *Blackwood* resumed with a reference to him as

“ a young man who had left a decent calling for the melancholy trade of Cockney-poetry and has lately died of a consumption after having written two or three little books of verse much neglected by the public.”

Keats's Fame

A comic analysis of *Adonais*, with parodies on it, followed. A few men knew what Keats was; Lamb, Shelley, Leigh Hunt and Keats' young friends. Reynolds, in a later letter, said: "He had the greatest power of poetry in him, of anyone since Shakespeare." Eight years after his death a group of young Cambridge men, including Tennyson, Fitzgerald, Sterling, Arthur Hallam, and Monckton Milnes—Browning, as a boy, had already been inspired by him—were the first group of enthusiasts who had not known him in the flesh. But the pundits still remained secure in their crassness. It was in 1832 that the *Quarterly*, reviewing Tennyson's poems, wrote of him as

"a new prodigy of genius—another and brighter star of a galaxy, or *milky way* of poetry, of which the lamented Keats was the harbinger."

Jeers at Keats's failure with the public were still well-founded in fact. Keats had been dead nineteen years when the first reprint of his collected poems appeared; and this went into remainders with Browning's *Bells and Pomegranates*. Four years after this Lord Jeffrey, still flourishing, observed that Keats and Shelley were falling into oblivion, and that of the poets of their age, Campbell and Rogers were those destined for immortality. Lord

Life and Letters

Houghton's edition of 1848 marks the date of the general recognition of Keats as one of the greatest of our poets. The maintenance and increase of his fame since then cannot be described in detail. "Keats," said Tennyson, "would have become one of the very greatest of all poets had he lived. At the time of his death there was apparently no sign of exhaustion or having written himself out; his keen poetical instinct was in full process of development at the time. Each new effort was a steady advance on that which had gone before. With all Shelley's splendid imagery and colour, I find a sort of *tenuity* in his poetry." Again, "Keats, with his high spiritual vision, would have been, if he had lived, the greatest of us." And the noblest tribute of all is the Essay by the present Poet Laureate, indisputably the finest thing that has been written about him, and one of the most penetrating, direct and—there is no other word—business-like critical studies in existence. "If," concludes that essay,

"if I have read him rightly, he would be pleased, could he see it, at the universal recognition of his genius, and the utter rout of its traducers; but much more moved, stirred he would be to the depth of his great nature to know that he was understood, and that for the nobility of his character his name was loved and esteemed."

Keats's Fame

And the words are all the more impressive as they end a study which is utterly unsparing in its detection and analysis of Keats's faults.

“High spiritual vision,” “the nobility of his character”; the phrases will still sound strange to those who take their conception of Keats from erroneous but hard-dying legend. He died of consumption; he wrote, when dying, love-letters which in places are morbid, though they are not, as a whole, so “deplorable” as is usually made out; and Byron gave universal currency to the delusion that he was killed by hostile criticism. This combination of facts has perpetuated the notion that he was a neurotic weakling with a hectic genius. It is all hopelessly wrong. Those who knew him thought him the manliest of men. Anecdotes like that of his hour's successful fight with a butcher twice his size whom he had caught ill-treating a cat, are unnecessary as corroboration; for corroboration is present everywhere in his letters, and frequently in his poems. A man who was killed by scurrilous blockheads of reviewers *would* be a weakling. But—except for the fact that attacks on him made it impossible to earn money by his poetry—he was indifferent to what was said about him. Every great poet knows his own capabilities; and Keats's opinion of those who were vilifying him was briefly expressed: “This is a mere matter of the moment; I think I shall be among the English Poets

Life and Letters

after my death." He was not *over* confident. He discriminated between his good and his bad work: "My ideas with respect to it" (that is, *Endymion*), he said, "are very low"; and a little later, "I am three and twenty, with little knowledge, and middling intellect. It is true that in the height of enthusiasm I have been cheated into some fine passages; but that is not the thing." But the only thing he was uncertain about was whether he had done anything good enough to show what was in him:

"If I should die, said I to myself, I have left no immortal work behind me—nothing to make my friends proud of my memory—but I have loved the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had time I would have made myself remembered."

Of that he was never doubtful. And he knew accurately the conflicting but not irreconcilable tendencies within himself; the tendency to luxuriate and the tendency to "philosophise." At the beginning the former predominated. He wandered, often led by the rhyme, through mazes of soft and luscious imagery; he held that the greatest poet was he who said the most "heart-easing" things; and the list of his favourite adjectives, compiled by Mr. Bridges, illustrates very strikingly the languorous quality of his dreams and desires.

Keats's Fame

But he was not made to be a slave to these : in the *Odes* and *Hyperion*, the richness and vividness and sweetness remained, but the tropical luxuriance had been pruned, and the native strength of his character and intellect, the clarity of his imagination, the absolute accuracy of phraseology of which he was capable, appear with a splendour that makes these poems incomparable with everything else in our literature but the greatest passages of Shakespeare and Milton. "I think," he said, "poetry should surprise by a fine excess, and not by singularity ; it should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance."

I have not quoted Keats ; I have barely referred to a few of his poems ; I have made no attempt to discover the secret of his greatness or expose the beauties of his art. In a space like this, one is forced to fasten on one or two details only when dealing with so great a writer as Keats and so solid a biography as Sir Sidney Colvin's. The structure and peculiar merits of Sir Sidney's volume one must also ignore. But all the material one could ask for is here ; the poet's art and thought are very fully illustrated from his own words ; there are several important additions to our knowledge of him ; and the long critical chapters, especially those on *Endymion* and *Isabella*, are as exhaustive and sensible as they are unaffected.

SHORT CUTS TO HELICON

I OPENED the *Times* Literary Supplement, and my eye was detained by an advertisement which for ten minutes made me oblivious to everything else in the number from "Dramatic Poetry" to "God and the Absolute." It was one of those rare advertisements which induce a train of thought.

And this was it. An institution called the London Correspondence College was inviting the *Supplement's* readers to learn how to write verse. "The field for Verse," ran the invitation,

"is much larger than most people suppose. Hundreds of journals publish and pay for poetry. Anyone with aptitude can learn to write the kind of Verse editors will pay for, by availing themselves of the excellent course of Instruction provided by . . . The training is individual and progressive; technique is simply explained, and any natural ability the student may have is developed to the full through his or her own work in connection with the lessons. The fee is quite moderate."

It was bound to come, and here it is.

Short Cuts to Helicon

I should greatly like to know—but I suppose that I could not find out without paying money, which I am reluctant to do—what are the suggestions, what the training, given to those who serve with the College their apprenticeship to the Muse. But I do not know, and I dare not guess, as secrets beyond my conjecture and stunts beyond my devisal may have been hit upon by the Professors of the College, and I should not like even to appear to misrepresent the nature, or the benefits, of their teaching. I may, however, without speculating as to what is *their* practice, be allowed to reflect on what would be my own should I ever find myself in control of an Academy of Shorthand, Typewriting, and Commercial Poetry.

Were this country America, or did the present American fashion for free verse spread here, the problem would be comparatively uncomplicated. "Technique" could certainly be simply explained, as both rhyme and regular rhythm are foregone, the poet can indefinitely vary his lines, and, for the content, all that is necessary is a catalogue of objects seen, heard, and smelt by the writer at any particular moment or series of moments. Here, dealing with the novice, one would instruct him on his morning walks to make a careful note of the objects he saw, and recapitulate their leading characteristics when he got home; then, killing with one stone the two

Life and Letters

birds of memory-training and art, he would catalogue any sequence of them. For instance : " misty air, a long straight street of flat houses, a solitary policeman in a shiny cape, a red pillar-box, a boy in the distance, whistling a tune." The next stage in the process would be to write these things down in irregular lines, the shorter the better, made up according to the author's taste or caprice. The last and finishing process consists of the judicious, or even the quite casual, interspersal of dots, and the addition of some single line of reflection, or exclamation which supplies the necessary touch of emotion. It would not be safe to leave the student to his own devices at the start ; he could quite safely be given a little list of last lines which could be used (preferably in italics) in any poem of the kind. " Oh, God! . . . " is one ; " Ah! the pain," is another. Behold the final result :

Misty air . . .
A long, straight street
Of flat houses . . .
A solitary policeman
With a shiny
Cape . . .
A red pillar-box . . .
A boy
In the distance
Whistling a tune.

Ah, God! the pain.

Short Cuts to Helicon

That, though I may not be able to persuade English readers that this is so, is the sort of "Verse" that in America "editors will pay for," and there is no reason why its construction should not be quite successfully taught by post. But on this side of the Atlantic things are a little more difficult.

In England "Hundreds of journals publish and pay for poetry," but almost all of them insist upon rhyme, and upon lines of equal, or regularly varying length. Moreover, there is a good deal of difference between the sort of subjects and styles demanded by various papers. I should, therefore, when framing my course for students, begin by telling them to study (as every successful business man is bound to do) the market, and the classes of goods most in demand by the various groups of consumers. Let the student note (*a*) the commonest subjects, (*b*) the commonest rhymes, (*c*) the commonest words, in the poems published by those papers which he decides to exploit. After a little labour he will be able to sort the papers into three or four main categories. He will then decide either to produce several types of goods for the several types of customer, or to concentrate on the largest available market for a single type, thereby giving himself a chance of perfecting his processes, and, by virtue of the advantages inherent in repetitive work, securing maximum output and reducing overhead charges (in

Life and Letters

which I include the purchase of magazines to see if they have printed anything yet) to a minimum. Let us suppose he decides to adopt the latter, and most efficient, course.

In accordance with the instructions I have given him, he has found that the subjects most in demand in his group of consumers are (say) love, flowers, joy coming after sorrow, sunset, and maternal affection. The statistical tables drawn up after examination of a thousand specimen poems have revealed that the separate words (excluding, of course, articles and conjunctions) most frequently required are "moon," "roses," "twilight," "slumber," "lullaby," "you," "blackbird," "joy," "sorrow," and "to-morrow"—the last two, for obvious reasons, being bracketed equal. Amongst the most frequent of the other rhymes are found "moon" and "June," "you" and "blue," "heart" and "apart," "love" and "above," "stars" and "bars," "sun" and "done." Now, whatever liberties may be taken by the advanced student ripe for original experiment and research, I should always advise the beginner who means to play for safety and avoid the risk of disappointment to keep as closely to the beaten path as possible. He may or may not save himself trouble by sticking boldly, whenever he writes, to the metre and rhymes of a particular poem in his card-index file. If he prefers to be original he should at least always

Short Cuts to Helicon

choose metres and rhymes which he knows, from his tables, to be always popular. Let us say that he decides on a poem about love of eight lines, in two four-line stanzas. For this, if every line (and editors greatly like that) is to have a rhyme, four sets of two rhymes are necessary. How should he next proceed? How select his rhymes?

To assist him here I should provide him with a little catechism for each class of subject. He can get right there with a few standard questions such as: (1) Is it to be a happy poem? and (2) What time of day is it (the love, or the meditation on flowers, or the maternal affection) to take place? These questions give a principle of selection; for instance, in a poem about the day, the sun will properly appear; in one about the night moon or stars may be introduced. Our poet has finally decided on love, and on the rhymes "love" and "above," "moon," and "June," "flowers" and "hours," "blue" and "you." Now it is clear that he can make the lines scan by counting the syllables; but where I am in difficulties about assisting him is in regard to the manner in which he shall fill the lines up. It is no good telling him to make them as like his models as possible: he could guess that much for himself. But suppose he gets as far as this:

EDWARD THOMAS

EDWARD THOMAS, who was killed in France in 1917, at the age of thirty-nine, wrote a large number of prose books. Even when forced to produce books for money he wrote with distinction and thought for himself; and the best of his English travel books are the work of a man saturated with every aspect of the country. For nearly twenty years he wrote no verse, but in 1913 he began writing poetry profusely. Only a few of his friends knew that "Edward Eastaway," who appeared in an anthology in 1917, was he. He was very shy about his verse and had prepared for publication a volume over the same pseudonym. His poems have now appeared with his real name on them. They make beyond comparison his best book; and there have been few books so good in our time.

Thomas was a tall, quiet, reserved man with melancholy eyes and strong hands, browner than those of professional writers usually are. His poems are like him, they are personal in spirit and substance; they have his quietness, his sadness and his strength. When there is profound emotion behind them it is

Life and Letters

characteristically expressed in few words and a slight troubled movement of the verse. The language is simple and direct, with few made phrases, inversions or fine adjectives; it moves slowly and reflectively, attuned to his prevailing mood, which might be called a mood of resignation if that word did not seem to preclude the inexhaustible freshness of his response to the beauty of earth, "lovelier than any mysteries." He felt always the pain of death, and change, but that never clouded his faculty for enjoying things; in his ecstasy over the endless miracles of the earth he was sobered by his knowledge of their transience, but he was not one of those dismal people to whom every ephemeral thing is first and foremost an illustration of the power of the abstractions death and change. He loved things for themselves and thought of their beauty more than of their brevity.

His poems are poems of the earth and of one man who looked at it, not knowing how long he would be able to. It is a lonely man who wanders through the book; when he speaks of other people they are memories or else faintly and remotely in the background. His human relations here are, we feel, subsidiary to, less intense and passionate than, his relations with nature. He is primarily a nature poet, and a peculiar and interesting one. The "landscape" of no English poet has been more normally English than his, and few have

Edward Thomas

covered such a range. Most landscape poetry deals with certain special kinds of times and places, dawn, twilight or sunset, mountains, bleak moorlands, ripe cornfields, seas very rough or very blue, summer more than winter, willows more than oaks, strong sunlight or strong moonlight more than the diffused light of an ordinary overclouded day. This is easily explicable. Scenes very definitely coloured, forms obviously decorative, seasons which make a violent appeal to our senses, shapes and shades by their nature and by tradition indissolubly associated with our universal elementary thoughts and states of feeling, will inevitably be those most commonly recalled and described. Moreover, many writers have their own dominant and habitual preferences from amongst these; the exhilarating dawns of Wordsworth, the bright, still sunshine of Keats, the large moons and lamenting beaches of Tennyson come automatically into the mind with the mention of their names. Edward Thomas was unusual in avoiding the usual. Not only did he not go to nature mostly for decoration or for a material setting for his moods, but he did not *select*, unconsciously or deliberately, his subjects. Except that he avoided large towns and the conventionally romantic, one may fairly say that he was liable to write a poem about anything one might see at any time of day in a walk across the South of England. He was not

Life and Letters

haunted by the rare unusual things, the one glorious night of a year, the perfect twilight on a lake, the remembered sunset over the marshes, which will haunt most of us. He was moved by and wrote about the things we pass daily and could look at properly if we cared to ; he was like one of those simple and charming water-colour painters who will sit down in front of anything, any ditch, haystack, or five-barred gate, and get the essential into a sketch. White winter sunlight ; rain on wild parsley ; hawthorn hanging over a reedy pond with a moorhen swimming across it ; spring snow and rooks in the bare trees ; a gamekeeper's gibbet ; the head-brass of a ploughman's team ; peewits at nightfall ; hounds streaming over a hedge ; a February day, thin sunlight on frozen mud and three carthorses looking over a gate ; old labourers going home—these are the things he wrote about, and many such trifles many times repeated are the English countryside as it is and as it has been. His earth is not merely something brown that goes with the blue at one particular moment or is dark against the sunset at another ; it is earth, now dusty, now wet and clogged, which is ploughed and takes its seed and brings forth corn in due season. He is as close to it at one time as at another ; the depths of his heart can be sounded by the dint of a hobnail on a path's mud ; and he wants no flamboyant sunsets

Edward Thomas

who can find all the beauty and mystery of colour in the curling white and gold and purple fronds of a pile of swedes.

Any of these poems might be quoted ; I will take as an example one of the least conspicuous, a poem less musical than many of them and only indirectly revealing his temperament, one that illustrates scarcely any of his qualities save the closeness of his observation and the use he made of the ordinary. It is *The Path* :

*Running along a bank, a parapet
That saves from the precipitous wood below
The level road, there is a path. It serves
Children for looking down the long smooth steep,
Between the legs of beech and yew, to where
A fallen tree checks the sight ; while men and
women
Content themselves with the road and what they
see,
Over the bank, and what the children tell.
The path, winding like silver, trickles on,
Bordered and even invaded by thinnest moss
That tries to cover roots and crumbling chalk
With gold, olive and emerald, but in vain.
The children wear it. They have flattened the
bank
On top, and silvered it between the moss
With the current of their feet, year after year.
But the road is houseless, and leads not to school,
To see a child is rare there, and the eye*

Life and Letters

*Has but the road, the wood that overhangs
And undergrows it, and the path that looks
As if it led to some legendary
Or fancied place where men have wished to go
And stay; till sudden, it ends where the wood
ends.*

This wood is anywhere and everywhere; we see it continually and take no notice of it; but I think that this poem would mean more than most to an exile in Rhodesia or the Soudan. You get another completely commonplace scene—the country station—in *Adlestrop*!

*Yes. I remember Adlestrop—
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.*

*The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat,
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop—only the name.*

*And willows, willow-herb and grass,
And meadows sweet and haycocks dry,
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.*

*And for that minute a blackbird sang
Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds,
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.*

Edward Thomas

And almost more typical still is *Tall Nettles* : the corner in a farmyard, with a rusty harrow and a stone roller overgrown by nettles covered with dust, except after a shower.

Where, here and there, the poet is more intimate and gives direct expression to his feelings, he uniformly reaches his highest level of poetry. The best, *The Bridge* and *Lights Out*, would be ruined by quotation; there are others, such as *Aspens*, where, standing at cross-roads, outside a smithy, an inn and a shop, he listens to the trees talking of rain, and gives the last word on his prevalent mood :

*Whatever wind blows, while they and I have leaves
We cannot other than an aspen be
That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,
Or so men think who like a different tree.*

There are one or two poems which touch on the war; the war as a distant and invisible horror subtly troubling the most secluded English fields. The references are brief; his own destiny has made them doubly poignant. But one fancies that dying he may have known that he had left behind him, in the fruits of his recovered youth, work that will make him a known and living man to at least a few in all succeeding generations of Englishmen.

THE WALLET OF KAI-LUNG

EVERYBODY knows about Mr. Thomas Hardy, Shakespeare, Lord Byron and Lord Tennyson. This does not detract from one's enjoyment of their works; but there is a peculiar and intense delight in good books which are not commonly known. English literature is sprinkled with them, and one's own favourites of the kind one talks about with a peculiar enthusiasm. For myself I continually urge people to read Trelawney's *Adventures of a Younger Son* and *Coryat's Crudities*, which, famous enough in the auction-room, is seldom enough talked about outside it. The present age, like other ages, produces these books that are less celebrated than they ought to be, and one of them is Mr. Ernest Bramah's *The Wallet of Kai-Lung*. This work was first published by Mr. Grant Richards in the year 1900. For all I know to the contrary, it fell quite flat; at any rate since that date Mr. Belloc has frequently informed an inattentive public that it is one of the best of modern books, but one has never heard it mentioned by any other critic. Largely, I take it, on account of Mr. Belloc's recommendation, Methuens have now issued it in their

The Wallet of Kai-Lung

1s. 3d. Library. It is a volume of Chinese stories.

One does not need to have read many translations from the Chinese to understand that there is a distinctive, a unique, Chinese way of looking at things. The late Count Hayashi, in his memoirs, observed that his own countrymen, whatever their material successes, could not help feeling inferior in the presence of the civilisation, the rounded philosophy and perfect manners, of the Chinese gentleman. A man who reads Chinese poetry is in contact with a mastery of the Art of Life. Religion does not come in much except for rather decorative gods and good spirits and demons; once admit religion in our sense and the Chinese conception of life will not hold water. But granted their rationalistic epicureanism they certainly carry it out to perfection. They keep so superbly their balance. Moved by the passions, they stand outside themselves and watch themselves with sympathetic humour. They would have grief but not its abandonment, joy but not its paroxysms; they are conscious of the sweet in the bitter and the bitter in the sweet. They bear pain, and the spectacle of pain, with equanimity; yet their calm does not degenerate into callousness, and their comments on the spectacle of life fall through the air like parti-coloured petals, which flutter noiselessly in the wind and show in constant alternation the grey side of

Life and Letters

irony and the golden side of tenderness. They enjoy beautiful things with an exquisite sensibility, but a careful moderation: wine, flowers, and the sky, snow upon the mountains, reflections in the water, song and the laughter of girls. They yield a little to everything, but surrender to nothing, save to death; and there they submit courteously, with dignity, and throwing back a glance of no more than whimsical regret. The old Chinese literature is steeped in this philosophy. They have, it is alleged, no literature now on a higher level than that which comes out on the tea-boxes. But the manners and the restraint remain. When the fall of the Peking Legations was in doubt the then Chinese Minister here, a most enlightened and charming man, was asked what would happen to the diplomatists if the rebels got in. "They will be decapitated," he said, with a slight inclination. "But what will happen to the women and children?" continued the lady. "They will be decapitated," he said. "But you, who are so pro-English, what would happen to you if you were there?" "I should be decapitated." He thought that adequate: it was only decorous to leave any anxieties or strong emotions he had to be guessed.

Mr. Bramah, in his book, has got the Chinese equanimity wonderfully; the most moving and the most horrible things are told with mild deprecation; the most grotesquely farci-

The Wallet of Kai-Lung

cal situations are analysed and developed with a full sense of their rich ludicrousness but with the very slightest loss of gravity on the part of the narrator. All the characters behave consistently, veiling their actions and their intentions behind the most transparent lies and subterfuges and saying the most offensive things in the politest possible way. For it is to the comic side of the Chinese genius that Mr. Bramah chiefly inclines. Now and then he uses China as an illustration of Europe. By transplanting customs and phrases he at once suggests the unity and the absurdity of mankind. In *The Confession of Kai-Lung* he is frankly preposterous. He describes Kai-Lung's early career as an author in terms precisely applicable to a European literary failure. He began by falling in love with Tiao T'sun, the most beautiful maiden in Peking, whom he frequently met

“at flower-feasts, melon-seed assemblies, and those gatherings where persons of both sexes exhibit themselves in revolving attitudes, and are permitted to embrace openly without reproach”

(which reminds one of the old lady's comment on the Tango, in one of the late “Saki's” books: “I suppose it doesn't matter if they *really* love one another”). Kai-Lung was successful in his suit. Then, “on a certain evening,” he says:

Life and Letters

“ this person stood alone with Tiao upon an eminence overlooking the city and watched the great sky-lantern rise from behind the hills. Under these delicate and ennobling influences he gave speech to many very ornamental and refined thoughts which arose within his mind concerning the graceful brilliance of the light which was cast all around, yet notwithstanding which a still more exceptional light was shining in his own internal organs by reason of the nearness of an even purer and more engaging orb. There was no need, this person felt, to hide even his most inside thoughts from the dignified and sympathetic being at his side, so without hesitation he spoke—in what he believes even now must have been a very decorative manner—of the many thousand persons who were then wrapped in sleep, of the constantly changing lights which appeared in the city beneath, and of the vastness which everywhere lay around.

“ ‘ O Kai Lung,’ exclaimed the lovely Tiao, when this person had made an end of speaking, ‘ how expertly and in what a proficient manner do you express yourself, uttering even the sentiments which this person has felt inwardly, but for which she has no words. Why, indeed, do you not inscribe them in a book ? ’ ”

He does. But while he is absorbed in his labour Tiao accepts “ the wedding gifts of an objectionable and excessively round-bodied

The Wallet of Kai-Lung

individual, who had amassed an inconceivable number of taels by inducing persons to take part in what at first sight appeared to be an ingenious but very easy competition connected with the order in which certain horses should arrive at a given and clearly defined spot." He completes his work, publishes it at great expense and great loss, and makes a last desperate bid with an effort to prove that the works of the great national poet were not sheer imitations. Here, in adaptations from Shakespeare, we lapse into burlesque. There are several quotations like: "O nobly intentioned but nevertheless exceedingly morose Tungshin, the object before you is your distinguished and evilly-disposed-of father's honourably-inspired demon"—though after all a Boer dramatic adapter *did* render the same passage as "I am thy papa's spook." This excursion, however, does show Mr. Bramah's style. That style is almost impeccable.

He keeps it up from start to finish; ceremonial to the point of absurdity, embellished with an unending flow of maxim and euphemism. It is not possible here to detail the complicated plots of his extremely ingenious stories. The best of all is *The Transmutation of Ling*. Ling is a studious youth who passes the public examination and, to his horror, is awarded, not a cosy nook in the Whitehall of Peking, but the command of a very white-livered band of bowmen who have to

The Wallet of Kai-Lung

resist the continual onslaughts of exceedingly ferocious bandits. His adventures are numerous and diverse. As I say, I will not tell the story, which Kai-Lung recounts, standing with a rope around his neck and his toes touching the ground, to a brigand chief with a formidable snickersnee. But one may perhaps quote some of the incidental proverbs, which add much to the grace of the tales.

“ Before hastening to secure a possible reward of five taels by dragging an unobservant person away from a falling building, examine well his features lest you find, when too late, that it is one to whom you are indebted for double that amount.”

“ The road to eminence lies through the cheap and exceedingly uninviting eating-houses.”

“ Although there exist many thousand subjects for elegant conversation, there are persons who cannot meet a cripple without talking about feet.”

Whether Mr. Ernest Bramah has been to the East or has merely caught the atmosphere of its literature I do not know. I have only recently even learnt who he is. But it is not surprising that one who likes good satire, good humour, good romance and good English should find the book worthy of being an inseparable companion.

ONE

LOVELY and pleasant it is to have lynxes for readers. A little while ago I referred to a verbal solecism of which the authors of the *King's English*—the most salutary and diverting of all works on composition—would not allow the use. A reader, whose title to speak is fully equal to that of those authors, at once wrote to say that I need not think that I avoided ugly and indefensible English altogether. I am, he says, deep-sunk in one vice which would certainly have been denounced by the authors of the *King's English* had it been as prevalent when they wrote as it is now. This is the habit of using "One" in contexts where it cannot pretend to represent anything but "I" or "me." He appends illustrative extracts: Four from Oneself, one from Mr. P. F. Warner, one from the Bishop of the Falkland Islands, and three from persons unknown—one of whom writes: "But I have known in the small circle of one's personal friends quite a number of Jews who . . ." Guilty!

The letter found one in a state in which one's defences are at their weakest. One was

Life and Letters

(and is) in bed with this loathly influenza, which has just shown its lack of discrimination elsewhere by killing the harmless Sultan of Turkey and sparing the Kaiser. One's head aches. One's spine aches. One's hip-bones and shoulder-blades ache and protrude. Countless little sharp coughs harry one's outworn stomach. One's throat is a dry stove-pipe. One's brows are tight and one's eyelids heavy with the pressure of one's hot blood. One has no taste for tobacco; one cannot talk, work, think, or drink. All one can do is to shut one's eyes until one is bored with that, and then read until one is exhausted by that.

I, I, I, I, I have, therefore, taken that course. My reading, as always in these circumstances, has been the Bacon-Shakespeare controversy; when I am very ill indeed I think there may be something in it. For two days I went from volume to volume, and at last I reached Sir Sidney Lee's *Life of Shakespeare*. This is, as is generally admitted, a prodigiously informative book, though its title might more accurately have been *The Probable Life of Shakespeare*.

The perhapses drape the book in festoons right up to the hypothetical last malady which Sir Sidney introduces in these touching words:

“The cause of Shakespeare's death is undetermined. Chapel Lane, which ran beside his house, was known as a noisome resort of

One

straying pigs ; and the insanitary atmosphere is likely to have prejudiced the failing health of a neighbouring resident."

But it is a great book. It is an encyclopaedia ; its compiler has written with great learning, judgment, and fairness of mind ; it is not likely to be superseded unless the Baconians suddenly prove their case. But (I observed on my couch) Sir Sidney has his defects as a writer. His ordinary style, compressed and clear, is wonderfully suited to the narration of dry facts. But when he feels he must be picturesque for a time or two, especially when he is attempting a little of that "merely æsthetic criticism" which he eschews in his preface, he is apt to be awkward with his imagery. Especially, he juxtaposes incongruous metaphors which, although moribund, are not quite dead enough to be put together unnoticed. When he writes of "all the features of a full-fledged tragi-comedy," one cannot help wondering whether "features" was a misprint for "feathers." I was wondering how it was that so sensible and unrheterical a man as Sir Sidney had left these sentences in this book after so many editions, when the letter arrived informing me, in the pleasantest way, that I had a beam in my own eye.

But, to continue our metaphors, my withers are unwrung by that beam. I know that I write "one" when "one" does not mean "we," or "everybody," or "any sort of

Life and Letters

person," but "I," or "me," and nothing else. One does not think one uses "I" and "one" in a single sentence; beyond that one is quite unscrupulous. One will say, for instance, "One opened this book with pleasure, which means, and can only mean, "*I* opened this book . . ." It is, from my critic's point of view, indefensible and inexplicable. Why do I do it? Or, rather, why do *we* do it?—for I am speaking now, not only for myself but for Mr. Pelham Warner and the Bishop of the Falkland Islands. The answer is simple. Reader, one is modest; bashful.

I—for here I will force myself boldly into the first personal pronoun—do not like seeing a page of print covered all over with I's. Those I's are so bold, so brazen; they stand up so, they are so tall. Often and often I suppress an "I" as I write, substituting the meaningless, but oh so comfortable and pseudonymous-looking, "One." Sometimes, owing to long custom, the operation is performed unconsciously. And often it is done deliberately after I have written. The proofs come back to one—here I am, lapsing again—and one is struck by the ubiquity of those little staring marks of egoism. Panic seizes one. "One" offers cover, and one takes it.

There is the negative advantage; one would be a hypocrite if I were to pretend that one finds in the practice no positive advantage for myself. If a critic writes, "I admit that I

One

did not approach this biography with a favourable bias, but it was worse than I expected," he is liable to an uneasy feeling when he reads his own words. All these people, he will reflect, may say to themselves, "What the devil are your biases to do with us, and as for your opinion, it is only your opinion." But knock out the first person and put "one"; and forthwith the whole statement seems to acquire the mysterious backing of all mankind. The critic's judgment looks like the inevitable judgment that any sane man was bound to form, that masses of men have simultaneously formed; there is weight, authority, behind it, something of the weight and authority of the royal, papal, or editorial "we."

That is not a defence; it is an explanation and a very discreditable admission. I admit that no really courageous or honest man (always excepting Mr. Pelham Warner and the Bishop of the Falkland Islands) would employ so ungainly a device to secure such dubious ends. As I have now confessed, I suppose that it would be futile to try it in these papers any more; my unobtrusiveness will no longer deceive. But if, in the future, it should be found that my works are covered with what I have heard another shy writer describe as "these horrible little telegraph-poles," do not blame me. The responsibility for the change, I hope I have made clear, rests elsewhere.

ANATOLE FRANCE

MR. LANE'S English translation of Anatole France has been appearing for a good many years and there are still volumes to come. The latest is *The Amethyst Ring*, translated by Miss B. Drillien so perfectly that I shall seldom want to look at the French text again. The book is short. M. Bergeret, the Latin Professor and Antiquary (all M. France's heroes are antiquaries) comes in very little, and then as a sort of chorus. The plot is a slight one and deals with a young Jew millionaire's plot to get an abbé made into a bishop in return for the abbé getting him an invitation to join the aristocratic Duc de Brécé's hunt. Involved with this are several of the rather libidinous love-affairs in which M. France (who, though he cannot always be consistent in his negation of morality, is always securely non-moral here) delights, and a great deal of discussion of the Dreyfus affair. The love affairs are of the usual type, purely animal. Young, rich men, selfish, and frequently surly, carry on surreptitious intrigues with married women, whom they meet for a few hours at a time

Anatole France

in hired apartments. Details of furniture and light, flesh, and linen are described with a perfect skill that almost makes the author's goatishness tolerable; but the more we have read of M. France's amorous interiors the staler they grow, as they are all so much alike, and we become violently conscious of his obsession. But his outlook on politics is much broader, and his description of the Dreyfus affair is, with all the limitations presently to be indicated, a historical document. We get the two sides to the discussion in a normal provincial town: one side taken by a few intellectual professors who feel that the Army and the Church ought not to be allowed to convict an innocent man on general grounds; the other taken by the ecclesiastics and gentry, who bother very little about the details as to Dreyfus, but think that it is horrible to question the verdict of an Army Court and are, anyhow, convinced that the Jews are eating into the vitals of contemporary France. No book ever written was more easy to read, but this is not owing to the author's contribution to the Dreyfus discussion or to his capacity for doing more than skim the surface (though he does that with marvellous justice and humour) of the opposed cases.

What we like is what we always like in M. France: the sly digs at everybody, the kindly insight into human foibles, the brief

Life and Letters

delicious pictures of town and country, church and castle, and the affectionate discourses on antiquities of every sort, religious and ceramic, architectural and armorial. The evidences of M. France's promiscuous learning and catholic taste are sprinkled on every page. It would be impossible to find descriptions more vivid, more certain in their atmosphere, and in their indications of the differences made by the contributions of various ages, than M. France's descriptions of the castles of Brécé and Montil. He has an almost physical feeling for the old stones, the plate-armour, the helmets, and the weapons, the books behind their netting in high, old libraries, the corridors, and staircases, the marble mantel-pieces, and bronze lamps, iron and brass. He is the most versatile and delicious connoisseur on record. But as for the rest—well, M. Bergeret, asked whether truth would prevail, said, "It is precisely what I, personally, do not think," and proceeds to explain that falsehood is at once more powerful and more amusing than truth. Thus speaking, he took the attitude which, though it may not have been natural to M. France, has become second nature to him.

For M. France has the defects of his qualities. He is a connoisseur, an antiquary, a sentimentalist; but he is a man of the world only in the more limited sense of the word. If he encountered a great living movement his

Anatole France

attitude towards it would be, whether for rational reasons he gave it support or not, much the same as that of Pontius Pilate in his own story. The background of his life is the background of the essay in *The Garden of Epicurus*: an immense cold universe, full of millions of stars greater than this world, and themselves perhaps part of a system which is a molecule in some other system; and, save for specks of matter, and of life, which is an iridescent gleam on the surface of that matter (or, as M. Bergeret in a pessimistic moment put it, part of a process of physical decay), it is all void. He thinks the chance of immortality is about equal to the chance of a man named Jones living in any house arbitrarily selected in any street: and apparently he regards the chance in either case with equal indifference. He is not blind to enthusiasms; but he looks down on the enthusiast as a person behaving in a quaint and rather pathetic manner. A "charming" manner, in fact.

Anatole France finds almost everything charming, from Tacitus to St. Pierre and from the simple devotion of a girl communicant to the fetichism of Africa—to which he somewhere refers as "that charming faith." All the past, all the remains of all the civilisations, all the causes for which men have lived and died, all ancient vagaries of custom, art, and belief, they are all "charming" and they all go into his mental cabinet. His perceptions

Life and Letters

are most delicate ; his sympathy is wide and ready enough to enable him to allow its little due of tenderness to every human suffering and aspiration and joy, its little tribute of easy tears to every soft landscape and every forlorn relic of old endeavour, its little meed of admiration to every heroic effort. But all, all seem small to him and all are in danger of that fatal epithet so suitable to the pastorals of Watteau and the engravings of Eisen, but, however effective at first sight, so misplaced and inadequate when applied to the deep realities of life. He can, in his own colours, recreate the past ; he is learned in it, and he has an affection for it. But he deals with the present as he deals with the past, looking at it from above, with an ironic tenderness and a tender irony. Sometimes, since the living are alive and kicking as the dead are not, he finds that his puppets hit back at him ; he cannot (being human) like that, and he has not yet sufficiently recovered his balance to find the French Symbolists charming. But even if he did he would emotionally miss, though he might intellectually apprehend, the essential in them, just as in this book he misses the essential in the best of the Anti-Dreyfusards. He is fair as far as he can be. He no more palliates the corruption of financiers and politicians (though he overlooks the ridiculousness of rationalists) than he does the stupidity and bigotry of soldiers, priests,

Anatole France

and the old noblesse. But he exhibits them all with a softening veil before them. What they do little matters; the bestiality of the intriguers and the brutes, the burning idealism of those who on the one side thought an innocent man was being persecuted and on the other side felt that France was being befouled by a crowd of rotten politicians and gross and greedy international Jews, alike escape him. He dislikes both injustice and vulgarity; but dislike is as strong a word as one can use.

He hates nothing: not even the Catholic Church, which, indeed, has had a lifelong fascination for him, although he classes Christianity with the cults of the Ibos and Ojibways and below those of the Greeks. He can see hate; he knows what it is like in other people; he has been tinged with its emanations; but he has not felt it. He thinks it, unless it is uncomfortably close, charming; if it is close he refuses to see it as it is. It is one thing to write of the past as if it were the present; it is another thing to write of the present as if it were the past, and that is what Anatole France has done. He is a connoisseur first and a man afterwards: taste and wit are for him substitutes for morality and religion. All things are trivial and if they are not already charming, time will soon make them so. But the man who finds passion charming has never felt it; the man who finds anger charming has never known it; and the man who finds

Life and Letters

death charming has never feared it. The philosophy which has dominated Anatole France has made him, with some deliberation, seal the springs of enthusiasm, of love, and of worship. He feels himself larger than life but he is not. The result is that he has never become the novelist he might have been, a novelist like Dickens or Balzac. If he lives, as I think he will live, he will live as a maker of bijouterie, a craftsman, a witty and dainty essayist. In his kind he is a perfect artist; that one complains of him is a tribute to his unexploited powers.

NATURAL WRITING

SOME time ago I wrote an article on George Meredith which "elicited" (gentle Jew, I thank thee for that word) an enormous mass of correspondence. It will, or rather (if I may assume an unjournalistic candour) it will not, be remembered that I then explained my aversion to much in the character and writings of that great man. My "peg" was a book published by one of George Meredith's relatives and containing certain sidelights on his life. I did not really base my objection to Meredith on facts "disclosed" by his biographer; it was more general and deep-seated; it was an objection which had its roots in a feeling that in his life and in his writings he was so artificial that one could not discover the real man. In the course of what I hope I may call my argument I complained about the strained tortuosities and insincerities of his writing. It was on this complaint that the only correspondent who disagreed with my article fastened: for most of them wrote emotionally to say that with this key I had unlocked their hearts, that they had always felt a sort of

Life and Letters

a something about Meredith which they had been unable to define, or that they had always disliked him and never had the courage to say so.

My correspondent says : " If you object to Meredith's language, how can you tolerate that of Henry James ? Why should not a man write as he likes if he has something to say ? " Well, I am prepared to face the first question directly. I don't worship any writer for his faults, and I don't think that James, especially the later James, wrote the sort of English that I should like to see repeated. His sentences twisted and sprawled, his metaphors clustered and clung, until it was often necessary to read his sentences several times over to make certain of his meaning. Yet his obscurity and discursiveness seem to me very different from those of Meredith. James did not, as a rule, use far-fetched words, or drag in metaphors for their own sakes, or elongate sentences in order to produce the effect of a firework display. He was far more likely to use slang words and to tangle his sentences with " as they say," " so to speak," and " at least in so far as," which are ordinary of the ordinary. His obscurity was the direct fruit of his passion for precision, his complexity was the child of his desire for simplicity. He wanted to state everything accurately ; he, therefore, introduced sub-clause after sub-clause for the sake of making what he thought necessary reserva-

60

Natural Writing

tions, and metaphor after metaphor sprang to his pen to convey just the shade of meaning that he wanted to express. In his later years it was his habit to dictate a typescript, to dictate a second from the first, and to dictate a third from the second. In each round or lap new qualifications and amplifications were, usually clumsily, crowded in, until there was a final draft overfull of detail and very difficult to read. But though his passion for precision might irritate some readers (Mr. H. G. Wells compared his efforts to those of a hippopotamus picking up a pea) who felt that such a degree of intellectual power ought not to be expended upon trifles, even they had to respect that power and the sincerity with which he used it: the hippopotamus is a big creature and this one was admirably painstaking. The one thing nobody ever suggested about James was that he was insincere or pretentious.

Meredith, on the other hand, was led into obscurity by his desire to impress: he was only intermittently sincere, he liked to "show off," he overloaded his work with superfluous decoration which was often not even good decoration. His obscurities were like the abracadabras of the medicine man; jargon primarily intended to impress the uninitiated. I remember a man telling me that he had spent a day with Meredith and that the novelist, before lunch, had said to him, "Would you like to lave your hands?" Well, a man might

Life and Letters

say that facetiously ; anybody might. But of Meredith it was characteristic. His cheap jewellery was sometimes very glittering, and it was mixed up with genuine gems. He had genius, intellect, and imagination, but he did not trust it. He was not so much afraid to be himself ; he positively disliked to be himself ; he wanted to be something more brilliant and mysterious, so he expended enormous energy in fabrication instead of being content with creation. He, who when he *was* natural, was great, usually refused to be. The ordinary word passed through his mind and, either before or after it reached paper, he deleted it and substituted the unusual, as a rule gaining literally nothing by the change.

A man should write naturally. Men's natures differ. It is natural to some, for one reason or another, to write parenthetically ; it is natural to some to write metaphysically ; it is natural to some (as it is to the illustrious author of *Wanderings in Arabia Deserta*) to use an outlandish compost of words. But whereas I never feel that Mr. Doughty is dragging in his extraordinary Saxon words to bewilder me or compel my admiration, with Meredith I usually feel that he is being self-consciously artificial. We cannot help our natures, our tastes, the bents of our minds ; but we can at least be true to ourselves.

We must be, when writing, as natural and as simple as our natures, given full play, will

Natural Writing

allow us to be. I must not be misunderstood to say that we should write precisely as we speak. It is not a good thing even to speak exactly as we speak. The M.P. who (Hansard and the newspapers put his orations a little straight) says, "Mr. Speaker, I rise to say, I mean I get up to announce that—er—if this Bill, this measure, gets through, passes—er—it is impossible to say what will happen, Sir, the country is well on the way to the road to ruin," is in a manner speaking naturally; but that is not the style one commends. The ordinary reviewer, if he wrote his criticisms precisely as he talks, would come out with passages like :

"We are just about fed up to the teeth with stuff like Mr. Timms's novel. We don't mean it is absolute rot, as the chap has got some intelligence. But he is playing the fool pretty badly, and if he goes on like this God help him."

But language may be what we call natural—that is to say may fail to make the reader feel that somebody is performing tricks in front of him—without being vulgar, and it may ring sincerely without being colloquial. Meredith, had he had to deliver the obvious kind of judgment recorded in that imaginary extract, would probably have begun with "Come we now to Mr. Timms, ambushed by all the sprites, an eye, distinctly, nay desperately,

Life and Letters

intelligent still gleaming darkly amid the weedy abysms of the sentimental brake. Icarus, one would say, rather, Dædalus, for that he, etc., etc.," and even after that he would have gone through it barbarously revising, knocking out "ambushed" in favour of "ambuscadoed" or even "embuscadoed," and dropping in adventitious tropes. Writing such as his is at its worst seems to me to have the vilest possible fault: it is "made up," it is heartless rococo. And if the same criteria that we apply to him are applied to others we shall find that all sorts of English writers stay in our net, and that writers of many different kinds slip through it. Contortions are not in themselves evidence of artificiality; and there is a kind of hollow simplicity and clarity which rings more false than anything in the world. For at bottom "the style is the man," and a style which, whatever its other merits or defects, annoys us by its air of artificiality, is merely the mask of a man who does not really mean, or feel, what he says. Here I must introduce a qualification. Anyone who took the above remarks literally might get the false impression that I was suggesting that, provided two styles were equally free from pose, they are equally meritorious. This would be ridiculous, a man's style is adorned by all kinds of things; some most unaffected people have no ear; others have a mania for digressions; others have a small or inexact

Natural Writing

vocabulary ; whole books have been and will be written about style. But I do lay it down as a postulate that a man should not deliberately festoon his work with insincere archaisms or unilluminating figures of speech, and that every man, in so far as it is consistent with saying just what he wants to say, should be as clear in his writing as possible. Even Meredith, I suspect, if he went into a public-house to get a drink, took care that the barman should be in no doubt as to what he wanted.

This, however, is not the last word upon style, which includes many things.

SECRET HISTORY

“**W**E are the people of England who never have spoken yet,” is the refrain of one of Mr. Chesterton’s old songs, and the thesis of his *Short History of England* (published by Chatto and Windus), which may be destined to be the most useful of his many useful books. Mr. Chesterton does not pretend to be a scholar, and he would probably not be surprised if he were told that there were numbers of inaccuracies in his book and numbers of important qualifications out of it. He will go a little too far sometimes for an antithesis, a joke, or a climax; and at some places in his history the learned may say, “This is all wrong.” But what matters is that the general motive and arguments are all right. Mr. Chesterton has a knowledge of human nature, a love of his countrymen, a belief in democracy, and, in spite of his strong opinions, a regard for truth. These are not always among the virtues of historians, and historians frequently lack the convictions that men are not born on the earth for nothing (that is, that life is worth living) and that the test of a civilisation is the sort of life that the

Secret History

majority of its members live. Mr. Chesterton has those convictions and he refuses to accept the common delusion that a civilisation of 1900 must be higher than a civilisation of 1800, because 1900 is after 1800 ; he, on the whole, is compelled to plump for the brief zenith of the Middle Ages, as the best period of a bad lot in the history of the English people. It is not sentimental mediaevalism, and he is not blind either to the advantages we have over our mediaeval ancestors or to the still greater advantages we might have if we only decided to regenerate our society instead of fatalistically submitting to the operation of "economic forces"—which are usually other words for the unbridled greed or undirected energy of individual men whom we are, if we only care to, at complete liberty to control, silence, lock up, or smite hip and thigh. He looks at the past with the eyes of a decent man who maintains that men have souls and that they should be treated like Christians ; and by that test he judges what has and what has not been done.

Never losing sight of that he gallops at top speed through English history ; he misses great spaces, but wherever his hoof touches it strikes out fire. Continually he tosses off a sentence, the product of a clear eye and an untainted heart, which will shatter the conventional reader's preconceptions. "The first half of English history," he says, "has been made quite unmeaning in the schools by the

Life and Letters

attempt to tell it without reference to that corporate Christendom in which it took part and pride." There is no need for commentary on this: it is simple truth. And it is equally true that we cannot understand the struggle between Henry II. and Becket unless we understand what the Church stood for as well as what the Plantagenet monarchy stood for. Becket did not lose favour and die merely in order that guilty clergymen should escape the proper reward of their crimes; and the situation cannot be rightly assessed unless we consider Henry's action in going to be flogged at Becket's tomb, and the popular reverence of Becket, together with the legal struggle that preceded the tragedy. The early legends—all our heroes, he notes, are *anti-barbaric*—the Reformation, the Civil Wars and the Eighteenth Century are all treated, perhaps sketchily, but with a verisimilitude that convinces. At every point the orthodox narrators stand condemned; and everywhere they have failed to attempt to grasp the real mind of the masses of the people and even—if the period is distant enough—that of their governors. Nowhere is this more noticeable than in the common treatment of the Crusades. They were not fought for nothing. They were not fought for gain. They were not fought out of bigotry. There was good and evil mixed in them, but no wars in human history were fought for a better cause and none appealed

Secret History

more strongly to the souls of common men. No more, again, do our historians attempt to visualise the great buildings of the Middle Ages, and what was behind them : they merely say they are there and give the Middle Ages one good mark for them. Opinions such as these Mr. Chesterton maintains with his usual wit and his usual eloquence ; his jokes are seldom forced in this book, and in many places he rises into noble passages of English prose. He lets out with immense good humour and effect at pedants of all sorts, especially anthropologists and Teuto-mongers ; and he gives by the way character sketches, particularly two of Sir Thomas More and Richard III., which are both brilliant and plausible. And he drives home an obvious truth when he accuses us of magnifying the defects of the Middle Ages by telescoping our chronicles. Certainly if a man were to write in eight pages a history of the last century, mentioning principally the wars and the sweating, he could make us out one of the basest generations on record. And that without falling back upon the ugliness of our civilisation and that mental plague, which, as Mr. Chesterton observes, has left us worshipping in children all that we have crushed out in men.

The book is not a history. It is a historical essay. It covers two thousand years in three hundred pages, and the general propositions leave little room for the facts which might

Life and Letters

illustrate them. But it might well be used by a more laborious writer as the theoretical basis for a history on the grand scale. Every contention that Mr. Chesterton advances, every institution that he describes, every trend of sentiment that he detects, might be documented from ruins and records, charters and songs, traditions and laws. The "evidences" for such a work lie scattered in thousands of books, buildings and memories, not to speak of the minds of living men: the one place where you will never find them in large numbers is a formal history book. The manner of writing history has been subject to fashions. At first men compiled—and they were then, at least to some extent, in touch with humanity—very indiscriminating chronicles in which, if battles received too much attention, at least they were battles and not merely episodes in economic development, and if legends received too generous an acceptance at least there was no assumption that you could understand men's deeds without understanding their dreams. The scientific spirit grew and the development of institutions was given, quite properly, increased attention. The 1297 Parliament of Stow-in-the-Wold, the Charter of Chudleigh, the refusal of the Hemp Subsidy, and other such incidents became landmarks with whole pages to themselves. Anxious to know how the British Constitution, in its widest sense, had reached its present

Secret History

condition, men catalogued ancient laws without really bothering about their origins and objects, and stared hard at ancient offices without visualising the men who occupied them. Political economy came into existence, and more was said about exports, imports, the mercantile theory, the discovery of the Mexican silver mines, the trading companies, and the Enclosures Acts. Finally, it became a commonplace amongst the enlightened that too little had been said about the "condition of the people" throughout history. Green wrote, with a laudable ambition, a work, the title of which recognised this. Paragraphs on the Black Death and the Peasants' Revolt began to be sprinkled with a few quotations from Langland; attempts were made at a systematic study of our forefathers' wages; and the excursus on the manners and pastimes of the multitude became common form. But whatever the narrative fashion of the age, and whatever the idiosyncrasies of particular historians, the real history of the English people remains to be written. There have been historians who have treated their subjects in a human way, and who have avoided quite openly the dry pseudo-scientific method. One wrote to celebrate the greatness of Tudor England; another to celebrate the triumphs of Whiggery. They were entitled to their opinions and their heroes: but of none of them was the hero the English people, and

Life and Letters

none of them were primarily concerned with the opinions, the emotions and the experiences of the English people. Our histories are all histories of the crust : if kings and aristocrats are not the only people who matter, then politicians and intellectuals are the only people who matter. The masses may be completely disregarded or they may be regarded with a measure, great or small, of sympathy : but when they are not forgotten they are, consciously or unconsciously, patronised, and openly or by implication denounced. Above all our history has been run in the interests of Industrialism, and where Progress has failed to be progressive historians have, often so naturally that they were unaware of it, blinded themselves to good things we have lost and the manner of our losing them. English history is, in effect, a whitewashing of the *fait accompli*.

Those are Mr. Chesterton's contentions, just as they were the contentions of Mr. Maurice Hewlett's fine agricultural epic *The Song of the Plow*, the history of which bears a close resemblance to Mr. Chesterton's. It doesn't matter whether he tells the whole truth or not ; at any rate, he emphasises many truths commonly overlooked. And if he also has a log to roll it is, at any rate, a more important log than the others. He, like Mr. Hewlett, ends with the war and the transfiguration of the common disinherited man, called upon at

Secret History

last to confront the nation which above all others had been praised by his professors and his politicians as a pioneer of civilisation :

“ He in whose honour all has been said and sung stirred, and stepped across the border of Belgium. Then were spread out before men’s eyes all the beauties of his culture and all the benefits of his organisation ; then we beheld under a lifting daybreak what light we had followed and after what image we had laboured to refashion ourselves. Nor in any story of mankind has the irony of God chosen the foolish things so catastrophically to confound the wise. For the common crowd of poor and ignorant Englishmen, because they only knew that they were Englishmen, burst through the filthy cobwebs of four hundred years and stood where their fathers stood when they knew that they were Christian men. The English poor, broken by every revolt, bullied by every fashion, long despoiled of property, and now being despoiled of liberty, entered history with a noise of trumpets, and turned themselves in two years into one of the iron armies of the world. And when the critic of politics and literature, feeling that this war is after all heroic, looks around him to find the hero, he can point to nothing but a mob.”

This also the scientific materialist will call rhetoric, and look for his explanations else-

Life and Letters

where, not seeing, or blind to their beauty if he does see them, the multitudinous idealisms and loves and loyalties in the host of inarticulate breasts whose only speech is action—and a misleading jest. But there is truth in the rhetoric, and the truth will be told about no large movement of humanity unless the imagination and the emotions are brought to bear upon the facts. Wat Tyler's followers, usually described as "a peasantry resentful of an unjust poll-tax," cannot be comprehended by that phrase; a whole novel would not be too long to display the confused minds of those resentful and then briefly exhilarated men who, though illiterate and no doubt incapable of formulating a system which would establish and secure what they wanted, had a Utopia of a sort in their hearts and knew what they immediately wanted, and that in justice they should have it, and were prepared to risk their lives that their class might have it. Mr. Chesterton's short passage on the Pilgrimage of Grace lets far more light in on the state of mind behind that rebellion than any amount of "facts" about it backed by lifeless references to "those whose sympathies still clung to the old régime." But one might come nearer. I happen to remember the 1906 election and the campaign in the rural constituencies of which I saw a good deal. A great and successful appeal was made to the agricultural labourer. The outcome of it was

Secret History

a largely unworkable and unworked Small Holdings Act. The Act will get a few lines in the histories: the appeal will probably get none at all. Moreover few, even of the men who made that appeal, and dangled before the labourer the realisation of his age-long hope of work in liberty with a proper reward on the land which is in his bones, exercised their imaginations sufficiently to realise what the promise and the disappointment meant to him. For he does not write books, he is slow of speech, he can only vote, after all, for one side or the other, and—in the end—centuries of frustration have made him resigned, and he is quite prepared, as often as necessary, to submerge his useless aspirations in a pint of beer. If the history of England still remains unwritten Mr. Chesterton's book may at least teach the next generation of historians their business.

MR. ASQUITH AS AUTHOR

EXCLUDING collections of political speeches, Mr. Asquith's *Occasional Addresses*, 1908-16, is his first book; unless, indeed, like most able young lawyers, he wrote something about Torts or Company Law in an earlier age. The book consists mainly of five considerable addresses: on Criticism, Biography, Ancient Universities and the Modern World, Culture and Character, and the Spade and the Pen—the last being concerned with classical studies and the place of archaeology. There are also lesser addresses on the English Bible, Omar Khayyam, and other subjects, a Latin speech made at Winchester, and several obituary "tributes" to eminent men deceased. These last, perhaps, would not all have been included had Mr. Asquith not desired to give the public a respectable sized book for its money.

But the smaller book would have been well worth it. No professional author has constructed in our time so clear, so compressed, so convincing a defence of the humanities, and so eloquent a demonstration of their daily practical value as Mr. Asquith has produced

Mr. Asquith as Author

in the sporadic addresses of his restricted leisure. It is not to be supposed that he devotes himself entirely to generalisations as to "culture," absorbed discursively, or under curriculum. Both his addresses to students and the others are full of incidental judgments upon books and men, criticisms usually indisputable, and often original. His criticisms of the literatures of the ancient world, as well as of English books of several centuries, would be well worth having if they illustrated no general argument at all. His tastes are, on the whole, orthodox; one deduces that he is most drawn to the admittedly greatest of writers. But though never eccentric, he thinks independently. The evidences of this are everywhere. One may quote his acute observation that

"if we were given fewer of a man's letters to his friends, and more of his friends' letters to him, we should get to know him better because, among other reasons, we should be better able to realise how his personality affected and appealed to others."

One may quote also his illuminating pages on the neglected autobiography of Haydon, the painter; his description of Haydon as "one of the acutest and most accomplished critics of his time," and his question, though it be a mere question, why it was that Haydon was

Life and Letters

not a great portrait painter. We may note, incidentally, as lights on his tastes, that he is a close student of Bacon and a devotee of Sir Walter Scott, and that he believes most of Shakespeare's sonnets to have had no relation with the poet's personal career. I have not, however, space here to enter into such questions of detail; and I must be content, as to Mr. Asquith's general views about culture, to refer readers to the book itself, and especially to the noble passages on pages 25 and 69. Nothing is more remarkable about these addresses than the apparently effortless way in which their author "lifts" to a higher level of eloquence. He favours the sustained peroration; but his perorations grow out of, are all of a piece with, what has gone before, instead of being shamelessly stuck on like those of the wanton rhetorician. One result of this, however, is that they are not detachable: one always wants to take in the sentence before, so to speak. Instead of attempting to quote them, therefore, I may be permitted to pass to a few remarks upon his way of expressing himself: what, vaguely, we call his style.

In his lecture on "Culture and Character," Mr. Asquith refers to the frequency with which "a man takes an hour to say what might have been as well or better said in twenty minutes, or spreads over twenty pages what could easily have been exhausted in ten." The offence of being "slipshod and prolix" is never com-

Mr. Asquith as Author

mitted by him. There is no greater living master of the summary ; and the qualities of his speaking are present in his writing. He surveys his field from a detached eminence, and sketches its main outlines with precision and in their due proportions. His survey is so simple and straightforward as sometimes to appear easy and obvious ; but a man who should succumb to that impression might be recommended to attempt the operation for himself. The certainty with which Mr. Asquith grasps his general ideas is matched by, and allied to, the lucidity with which he formulates them. No one, I might add, who was not habituated to accurate expression could, when occasion calls, say nothing at all with Mr. Asquith's ease and safety. His verbal instrument is the perfect servant of his mind. It is indeed difficult for a politician to retain a sound style. Whenever he rises he must play St. Anthony to beckoning hosts of clichés ; and according to his temperament he will be more liable to yield to one bevy or the other, to those of wooden pomposity and sham dignity or to those of intemperate rhetoric and sham passion. Mr. Asquith, as a political speaker, has been known, not infrequently, to lapse into a hollow resonance, and there are a few examples of this pardonable and almost unavoidable humbug in the obituary speeches printed at the end of this volume. But as a speaker—or, rather, a writer—on other subjects he is

Life and Letters

entirely free from it ; and his style is literally a model of its kind.

It is what is called a classical, what used to be called a " correct " style : the style natural to a man of his intellect and temper. His sentences are close-knit : packed, but easy. Every phrase adds something ; but an intractable content never destroys the balance. In the Latinity of the language, in the structure of the sentences, in the objectivity, impersonality, of the writer's attitude, there is something reminiscent of the eighteenth century. There are constant faint traces of Johnson, of Burke, of Gibbon. We observe the affectionate use of words like " denigration " and " fuliginous " ; and admirably compendious phrases like that in which, referring to the production of superfluous biographies, he speaks of " the monuments which filial piety or misdirected friendship is constantly raising to those who deserved and probably desired to be forgotten." One has employed the word " affectionate " ; and here, of course, is one of the places where personality does come in. Marked proclivities in language are in themselves windows into personality. And in these addresses Mr. Asquith's individuality peeps out in all sorts of ways : in the revelation of his tastes, in the warm mental glow which saves from frigidity the most " scientific " of his paragraphs, and in his frequent humour. But he does not write to display his powers of writing ; he

80

Mr. Asquith as Author

does not parade his tastes because they are his (announcing them merely because they appear to him to be sensible and reasonable); and he does not jump over the hedge for any joke or take even those which stand right in his road save in the most delicate and undemonstrative manner. Many readers, by no means obtuse, might well miss the gentle jest in his address to the Royal Society, which was founded by Charles II. :

“ Whether the interest in anatomy displayed, as your annals show, by the Society in its earliest years was due to the proclivities of its Royal Patron, I do not know . . . ”

The passage on the uses of the bastinado and the knout in criticism might also be quoted; and the charming account of Jeremy Bentham's variegated evenings. His criticisms and apt images are all the more enjoyable because of their subservience to his main purpose: his refusal to allow the garlands to conceal the pillar. And one must mention his extraordinarily happy and judicious use of quotations. They are never dragged in by the heels to display learning or import a facile colouring; but the few he makes, both from English and from classical authors, are, by their very nature and pertinence, an unmistakable proof of large reserves. His temper, almost always, is amiable. But just as the even surface of

Life and Letters

his language is sometimes abruptly and effectively broken by an unusual or a colloquial word, so his pervasive, easy tolerance now and then yields. Something hard comes into sight, like black rocks under a smooth sea; self-knowledge, determination, a settled, though usually concealed, contempt for the complacent stupid, and the pretentious superficial. But he never loses his self-control.

It would be easy to supplement this brief catalogue of some of Mr. Asquith's qualities with a list of the qualities which he does not possess. He has little, no doubt, in common with Rousseau, Shelley, and John the Baptist; like the rest of us, he is something and not something else. But, reading this too slight collection, one remembers the superb generalisation that "conference maketh a ready man, reading a full man, and writing an exact man"; and one feels that the three processes have here been operating, with uniform success, in one person.

THE INFINITIVES THAT WERE SPLIT

TO any writer, unless he be a morose hermit, it must be a pleasure to receive unsolicited letters from strangers. I myself—one must take one's illustrations from the nearest available source—receive such letters occasionally. They are as varied as possible. One correspondent, I remember, asked me what was my Christian name; another sent me a flower plucked on the slopes of Hymettus; another, having seen me complain that I had vainly tried for years to secure a copy of the *Undertakers' Journal*, obtained one from a parishioner, and forwarded it with a letter full of sinister charm. There are letters of congratulation, letters of abuse, letters seeking for knowledge, and letters (alas, too many!) pointing out ignorance. They all relieve the monotony of the post. All are welcome; save only letters which deal with well-known and unobscure points of grammar.

Two people write to me about a recent essay in this series. One says that it contained A SPLIT INFINITIVE; the second that

Life and Letters

it contained TWO SPLIT INFINITIVES. The first says "I suppose you are one of those who defend split infinitives"; the second assumes that no defence is possible. We can start, therefore, with the fact clear that there *are* two sides and two parties to the question. There are some men who would no more split an infinitive than they would split their father's head with an axe, and who, when anybody else splits one, split their sides; there are others who, on occasion, will as cheerfully split an infinitive as a soda.

Far be it from me to any longer than I am bound to dwell on a subject about which people are apt to so violently differ. But it is, I feel, my duty to briefly confess that there frequently are places in which splitting an infinitive secures an additional emphasis which could not be secured without the split, and places in which an infinitive that is not split makes one at once conscious that the author has tried to, at all costs, avoid a split infinitive with the result that his expression seems strained.

I seldom split an infinitive. When I do I shall not feel called upon to explain why I do. But I am not content to leave the subject at that. For it has made me aware of something about which, however generally it may be experienced, I do not feel altogether easy. It has suddenly occurred to me that although I do not often perpetrate a split infinitive, I

The Infinitives that were Split

am often on the verge of doing so. I write down, in the first ardent flight of my fancy, some phrase like "to altogether condemn" or "to exactly express," and then I go back and alter it into "altogether to condemn" or "exactly to express." I now know that when I do this I do not do it because I think it right to do so, or because I think that in all cases the undivided, unseparated, indissolute, integral infinitive is the more elegant. I do it out of sheer cowardice. I am in fear of the pedants. I am (which is quite a good reason) bored by the prospect of getting letters asking for an explanation, and I am (which is not a good reason) cowardly afraid of appearing not to know that infinitives ought not to be split or of being supposed to lack the taste, the ear, to detect one when I write it. And, realising this, I realise that there are all sorts of other alterations that I make in the same pusillanimous and unnatural way.

Is any of us natural? Is there one who invariably writes impeccable English at first go off? Is there one who, if he does not, has the courage to let his first fine careless raptures stand? I doubt it. Since I first got fascinated by this topic I have asked five or six of the most scrupulous and respected writers of English alive what is their practice. Accepting no evasions, I have discovered that every one of them habitually alters things after he has written them. I am not referring

Life and Letters

to alterations made for the sake of obvious improvement, strengthenings of epithet, or clarifications of phrase ; I am referring merely to alterations which turn something colloquial and natural into something artificial and grammatical which will stand the scrutiny of the lynx-eyed gentlemen of leisure who seem to have nothing better to do than to look for specks in the suns of literature : errors, easy of commission, but indefensible by the rules.

The split infinitive is only one thing in a large category. There is "that" and "which" and "who"; they are continually being exchanged because one or other of them, although the meaning is quite clear, looks a little wrong where it is put. There is "who" and "whom." How often have I, how often have Dickens, Wordsworth, Milton, and Shakespeare (Homer was a Greek, and so eluded the difficulty) been bothered by the necessity of dealing rightly with these preposterous pronouns, revising sentences in which they occur, saying to ourselves "Bother" (or, in the cases of Wordsworth and Milton, "Damn") "it all, is this the nominative after the verb 'to be,' or the accusative after a transitive verb, or what else?" "Who did you see?" we (Shakespeare, etc.) write. The spectres of all the grammarians in the world rise before us as we write; we weakly go back and put an "m" after the "who"; an "m" which we may scatter indiscriminately about our conversa-

86

The Infinitives that were Split

tion without knowing or caring whether we always have it in the right places.

Some of us (Shakespeare and Milton, but not so much myself in this instance) write down "It is me," or "It was him." The same ghostly battalion emerges like vapour from the soil; the author looks uneasily over his shoulder and, with a twisted smile, substitutes "It is I" or "It was he." Accuracy has been secured at the cost of naturalness; Cerberus has had his sop; the mouths of the pedants are stopped, and their tongues will not wag. There is another thing still worse: the obligation of "following up" pronouns of alternative gender. You find you have to write, for example, a sentence such as

"The story as told by Mr. (Mrs. or Miss) Jones does great credit to his, or her, powers of narration. He, or she, has a very flexible style; and his, or her, sense of humour is often considerably more in evidence than his, or her, respect of persons."

That is what you finally evolve. But your first impulse was ("their" having been rejected as hopeless, since there is only one author) to write "his" all the way, and let the alternative "her" be understood. But you did not dare. You had not the courage. You were afraid that if you did, somebody would think you were slipshod, or somebody else

Life and Letters

would think you had not noticed that you had brought the feminine in at the beginning, or (worst of all) that somebody else would think you were unaware of the fact that you cannot use the masculine possessive of a feminine possessor. Your sentence, in its final and highly grammatical form, is just as ugly and awkward as it would have been had you left it as it was. But your reputation for knowing all about the King's English is saved; and you feel that though they may call you foolish, dull, biased, tasteless, old-fashioned, decadent, or profligate, though they may suspect you of forging cheques, of secret cannibalism, of garrotting, or of addiction to heroin or cocaine, they will at least not be able to direct against you the far more cutting and humiliating charge of being ungrammatical.

Ought writers so to contort themselves (note how I have avoided the split by putting that "so" before that "to") for such reasons? Ought they not rather, assuming them to be knowledgeable people and people with a respect for the language which they are handling, to be brave enough to stand by phraseology which they use daily in speech, and which only by slow and laborious effort they can avoid in print? I am sure they ought. But though I still cling to a belief in the occasional split infinitive, I fear I shall not often have the courage to act up to my faith. I have never yet gone to the lengths of the precise London

88

The Infinitives that were Split

householder who has on his door "Do not ring unless an answer *be* required." But the "Constant Reader," so far as I am concerned, will always retain his power. But if, widening his scope, he goes off grammatical errors into stock quotations and clichés (which are certainly at least as reprehensible) almost the whole British Press will go out of business.

DR. JOHNSON

MR. S. C. ROBERTS has compiled, the Cambridge University Press have published, and I have just read, a small book called *The Story of Doctor Johnson*. It is virtually an introduction to Boswell. It is ostensibly intended for children, but I think that there are some millions of white adults who might profitably read it. For *Boswell's Life*, though we are all *supposed* to have read it, is, as a fact, by many people taken for granted. They presume themselves to have read it, just as they presume themselves to be familiar with the Bible, and if confronted with a question about Langton or Dr. Taylor or Topham Beauclerk they are as stuck as if they were catechised about Amos, Habakkuk, or the Epistle to the Galatians. And even if they are conscious, and willing to assert, that they have never opened Boswell, they are usually unaware of the value of what they missed. They think they know Johnson; but they do not.

Most men who are not illiterate moujiks have some conception of Dr. Johnson's per-
90

Dr. Johnson

sonality and opinions. They are familiar with the late Reynolds portrait ; the wig, the lumbering shoulders and chest, the puffy eyes, fat, seamed face, loose but obstinate mouth. They probably supplement the picture with printed descriptions, taken from Macaulay or elsewhere, of his stature and gait, his loud laugh, his domineering habit in conversation, his gross table manners, his dislike of clean linen, and his unpleasing custom of smearing gravy and potatoes over his clothes. They have heard typical sayings. He jeered perpetually at the aspiring and hungry Scot. He said that patriotism was the last refuge of a scoundrel ; that a ship was a floating gaol ; and that, when writing Parliamentary reports, he did not let the Whig dogs have the best of it. And, for the rest, he was customarily abusive, answering questions with " Sir, that is a very silly question," or " Then, sir, you are a great fool."

That is the sort of picture of Johnson that lodges in the brain of the man who has not read Boswell ; for the man who has not read Boswell is not likely to have read Sir John Hawkins or Mrs. Thrale. That it should exist, and should be so widely dispersed, is proof of the force and weight both of his personality and of Boswell's unequalled portrayal. No dead man lives so widely and so vividly ; even Napoleon is a more shadowy—and would, if he suddenly appeared at a tea-party, be a less

Life and Letters

recognisable—figure. But the popular conception is wholly inadequate. It does not account for the reverence with which Johnson is by many held, the tender affection which many feel for him, and the verdict of many that, excepting one who is known to us only through his works, Samuel Johnson was the greatest of all Englishmen.

He who knows Boswell, though he never look at a line of Johnson's frequently very revealing and entertaining original works, knows Johnson outside and in. He knows him as the social figure, the Grub Street hack of early, the autocratic Great Cham of later, years; the diner-out and conversational giant who was the model of courtesy to women, the tyrannic disputant with men; the independent theorist who often on principle deferred to rank or office, but never cringed to a man. He knows him as a great if erratic scholar, a master of the classic languages from childhood, interested in all human affairs; a learned essayist and a herculean compiler who produced the first, and still almost the most interesting, of our standard dictionaries. He knows him as the proud and independent spirit who answered Chesterfield's tardy offer of patronage with the most crushing and eloquent letter in the language; and in whose character and demeanour no change of circumstances made the least difference. But he knows more; he gets below isolated phrases

Dr. Johnson

and acts into something deeper in which those were rooted, and of which they were sometimes only the fantastic flowers. He knows that Johnson's character was one of the noblest and his mind one of the sanest and most powerful of which we have record.

Johnson was habitually dogmatic and frequently rude. These were faults if you like; but the noticeable point about them is that his friends did not resent them, and that if his verbal brutality hurt a super-sensitive person he always regretted it. But his faults were the defects of his qualities; he did have a grasp of things such as few men have had; Burke was content to receive light from him on politics and Reynolds on painting. The prejudices which are so characteristic of him to common thinking did exist; but he was a humorist. Every humorist has his "stunts," and Johnson's prejudices about Scotchmen and other bugbears were largely deliberate and artificial, kept up in order to give salt to life. They were not ungovernable: five of his six assistants on the dictionary were Scotch, as was Boswell; and, in spite of his remarks about Whigs being rascals and republicans, and suitable candidates for transportation, when he met Wilkes (who really was a rascal) at dinner he talked to him with great spirit and amiability. He had a habit of expressing his Toryism in extreme terms; but it had, as almost all his judgments on all subjects,

Life and Letters

a hard basis of reasoning tempered by common sense, which is often beyond reason. His Jacobitism, if it was hardly a joke, was, at all events, little more than a symbol; he was not the man to worship shibboleths. He was not without sympathy with the generous parts of eighteenth-century Radicalism; and if he was strongly anti-revolutionist, it was not because he was deliberately biassed or had vested interests, but because, with his reading of history and human nature, he formed the conclusion that the necessity in his day was to insist on that need for "subordination" which so strongly impressed his mind. Other men differed; but he could, when he liked, put up a remarkably powerful case for any belief he held; and even those who share none of his beliefs may well withhold condemnation of the Tory who in the middle of the eighteenth century said that "A decent provision for the poor is the true test of civilisation."

Johnson, as a politician and as a critic, had, like all men, his limitations; but his common sense was such as to deserve the name of genius, and he continually surprises us with flashes of the profoundest insight. For behind his common-sense practicality was a troubled, suffering spirit to which all faiths and all doubts were known, all arguments, all fears, and all hopes presented themselves. The lumbering great "argufyer" and wag was

Dr. Johnson

fundamentally a man with a strong imagination and a large heart. He had a horror of death, and fought with it. He wrestled nightly with his besetting sins, chiefly that of indolence. Some of the prayers he wrote for himself bite very deep. He detested sentimental talk, but now and again the strength of his emotions broke through the crust, and a friend would realise the depth of his affection for mother or wife, or one of the helpless dependents with whom he constantly saddled himself. He was intolerant of presumptuous fools, rough with those who differed from him ; nevertheless, he was one of the most generous, affectionate, and natural of men, and one of the most courageous. He said, years afterwards, that he and Dick Savage, having no money for beds, once spent the night trudging round St. James's Square. They canvassed heaven, earth, and their woes ; and in the end agreed " to stand by their country."

He related it as a pathetic jest ; but hardly, one imagines, without justifiable pride. For then, as always, he was consciously resolved not to let his personal distresses warp his judgments or distort his ideas of good and evil. The need for " clearing our minds of cant " and the other need of fighting the fears in our minds and the menaces of circumstance, are the two outstanding " lessons"—if one may use the word—that are driven home by his biography ; and any child or adult who is

Life and Letters

led to Boswell by Mr. Roberts's ingenious and well-illustrated manual must, I conceive, benefit morally, as well as being entertained as he will seldom be in a normal life.

A PUZZLE

I THINK, but I may be in error, that George Meredith himself requested that there should be no "official life" of himself. Certainly such a veto would be natural in him, for he was, save under the veil of fiction, secretive about large portions of his experience. The life recently published (*George Meredith*, by S. M. Ellis) is, however, by a cousin of his, and some of the material included appears with the permission of his son; it may, therefore, be regarded as being as near an intimate life as anything we are likely to get.

It is not a very good book. The author's English is not of the first order; and a great deal of space is taken up with quotations—many of which are superfluous—from Meredith's works. All the industry that has obviously been lavished on it has failed to disinter any information about several of his early years, and it is in large measure a compilation from letters and the published remarks of Meredith's critics and friends. But what Meredith did in his seventeenth year—when he can only be presumed to have been in London—does not seriously matter; and there is no

Life and Letters

need to complain that the "new facts" produced are not more exhaustive. My complaint is that after reading this book, as after reading Meredith's novels and poems, I still do not know Meredith, am still puzzled by him, and am still (I admit it with all diffidence) irritated by him. That I, an individual, feel like this about a man held by many to be great and good could interest no one but myself; but I know that both my bewilderment and my irritation are shared by others.

I have often asked people, very catholic in their tastes, why they did not like Meredith: I have never got a satisfactory explanation yet. There are a few actions in his life at which positive blame has been levelled. He apparently treated his first wife very badly when, in her last illness, he refused to go to see her. He quarrelled with his father and he quarrelled with his eldest son. His refusal to see either wife or son on their death-beds is here half excused by his shrinking from sickness and death: one can only say that the facts are not complete enough to enable one to form a judgment either way. During his three years of journalism he wrote, for a Conservative paper, violent attacks upon the North, Lincoln, and John Bright, although his personal opinions were the opposite of those of the paper. He annoyed many people by his exaggerated secretiveness about his parentage and the place of his birth (which he would

98

A Puzzle

never give properly, even in a work of reference); ten years after his marriage one of his close friends was merely guessing that he *had* been married. But people feel a certain remoteness from him who are unaware of all this; I know I always did myself. It is hard to define. Even "distaste" seems too strong a word for the feeling; and the image used by Henry James who, when looking for something wrong about d'Annunzio, compared himself to the plumber searching a house for the source of a bad smell, comes into one's mind only to be dismissed. What is the characteristic that repels?

Those who have called him a snob because he insisted on writing about leisured Olympians and never mentioned the Portsmouth shop are superficial on the first point and demonstrably wrong on the second; for, in a novel, he expounded his family history without taking the slightest pains to avoid identification. In any event it is not a defect of that sort one is looking for, but something far deeper and more pervasive, a streak which gives a tone to everything he wrote and all that is recorded of him. What was his character, one wonders? Was he a mind, tastes, a temper, without deep generous affections? How can one ask that of a man who expressed himself so profusely? Is not the reason that he concealed himself behind a mask? What was there behind the mask? worse question of all, was there any-

Life and Letters

thing behind the mask? So one question leads to another! One thinks of him as a pretender, a poser, a man who could not be himself. One links up his personal secretiveness with the abominable artificialities of his style. These appear early. At twenty-one he writes of a poem to the publisher "It was written immediately on receipt of the intelligence which it chaunts"; and one feels that some common word had been struck out and the exotic word put in; a method of procedure habitual to him when he wrote poems. One reflects on the thinness of the so-called philosophy which has deluded many simple people by the pretentiousness with which he covered up the triteness of his earth-worship in difficult jargon. One remembers his most-quoted *mots*; the thin-concealed platitudinousness of the statement (how on earth do critics persuade themselves that it is brilliantly illuminating?) about man having rounded Seraglio Point but not yet doubled Cape Turk. One thinks of the mounds of tinsel tropes, not images smoking from the heated imagination, but gauds of fancy fabricated by a very deft hand. One remembers his indefensible obscurity. The obscurity of Blake was that of the stammering visionary; that of Browning was sometimes the obscurity of carelessness and sometimes that of over-rapid thought, but there was always something there. The tortuous difficulties of Meredith are made

A Puzzle

up like the maze at Hampton Court, and when you have threaded them you find that there is nothing there, or something quite simple, like a square of green grass. Look at the *Woods of Westermain* :

*Hither, hither, if you will,
Drink instruction, or instil,
Run the woods like vernal sap,
Crying, hail to luminousness !*

But have care.

*In yourself may lurk the trap
On conditions they caress.
Here you meet the light invoked,
Here is never secret cloaked.
Doubt you with the monster's fry
All his orbit may exclude ;
Are you of the stiff, the dry,
Cursing the not understood ?
Grasp you with the monster's claws ;
Govern with his truncheon-saws ;
Hate, the shadow of a grain ;
You are lost in Westermain.
Earthward swoops a vulture sun,
Nighted upon carrion.
Straightway venom wine-cups shout
Toasts to One whose eyes are out.*

The man who is not annoyed by that is a devotee indeed ; and Carlyle himself never equalled the roundabout artificialities of a writer who would sprinkle his letters with

Life and Letters

made-up perversions like (I take the first to hand) "I am now bather anew in the Pierian Fount." He would always write "fit not" instead of "do not fit" or "Thank-song" instead of "song of thanksgiving." A vocabulary or an order used by his fellows was an abomination to him. Was it that he was in perpetual dread of thinness, not merely anxious to display, but positively afraid to be himself since himself was not a good enough thing to be? And even when that is admitted, does not something still remain; something quite positively objectionable; an attitude towards things, and especially towards women, which one can only vaguely indicate by calling it a sort of refined gloating?

So our thoughts proceed. And then we check; realising that he did great things and that great men found him great. "Not an artist, oh, not an artist," said Henry James to a friend, "but he did the best things best." Part at least of a poet was in him. The famous things come into one's mind: the scene at the weir in *Feverel*, stanzas of *Love in a Valley*, the blossoming tree in *The Egoist*, the sonnet on *Prince Lucifer*, and passages in *Modern Love*. The mystery and the bewilderment return; we doubt his powers but admit his achievement, we call him connoisseur and poseur, and find him writing of people like a man and of nature like an enthusiast. But for me, I tell myself this, but still I find that I am not in contact

A Puzzle

with him, that I do not know him, that I do not relish the thought that there are books of his which still remain unread by me, that I do not genuinely like him, and that when I find that after his death—he complained continually that this was so during his life—the large public still refuses to read him, I am not surprised. A few years ago a small and comparatively cheap edition-de-luxe of his poems was published. Before long, though his name was famous and nobody denied that he had written some beautiful poetry, the book was to be bought cheap as a remainder. I may be confessing my limitations in saying so, and I respect some of Meredith's warmest admirers; but I never felt more genuinely a democrat than when that book failed.

TOM THUMB

THE American nation—as the alcoholic are now learning—does not do things by halves. Having decided to “prosecute the study” of English literature, American Universities are producing critical monographs and exotic reprints at a pace never before equalled. Great stress is laid, when young men and women produce theses for the literary doctorate, upon the need for tackling new subjects. This attitude, so far as criticism is concerned, has led to an excessive pursuit of minutiae; despairing students have to invent subjects like “The Colour of the Hair of Shakespeare’s Clowns” in order to be certain that they are exploring genuinely untraversed ground. But the passion for novelty shown by those who edit texts is entirely to be commended. It is much more interesting and useful to dig up some obscure but amusing work and annotate it than to produce yet one more edition of *Hamlet* or *Endymion*. During the war, American editors have resuscitated several good neglected poets, such as Cleveland and Lady Winchilsea, and amongst numerous prose enterprises there have been

Tom Thumb

several editions of minor classics of the eighteenth century. One is a competently edited reprint of both versions of Fielding's *Tom Thumb* (*The Tragedy of Tragedies*), by Professor James T. Hillhouse, published in this country by the Oxford University Press.

Fielding's most amusing play—the very name of which must be unfamiliar to most readers of *Tom Jones*—was written when he was twenty-four, and enlarged shortly after. It is a lampoon on the heroic verse tragedy produced by Dryden and his mouthing successors; and the selection of the fairy-tale of *Tom Thumb* (who is the bold hero) as its theme well illustrates the extravagant vigour and high spirits of the whole work. Its success on the stage showed that the London public was ready to turn away from the bombast and fustian that the literati had palmed off on it; the range of careful reading attested both by its text and by Fielding's solemn footnotes, prove the absurdity of the common legend that in his youth the novelist was a dissolute waster.

The work is so good that even one who had never read any of the plays parodied would heartily enjoy it and at the same time realise precisely what these plays must have been. Fielding's humour is at its best in the ironic preface, where he professes to treat the play as an Elizabethan relic from which the authors he is ridiculing have cribbed. “I shall ware,”

Life and Letters

he adds, "at present, what hath caused such Feuds in the learned World, Whether this Piece was originally written by Shakespear, tho' certainly That, were it true, must add a considerable Share to its Merit; especially, with such who are so generous as to buy and commend what they never read, from an implicit Faith in the Author only: A Faith! which our Age abounds in as much, as it can be called deficient in any other." There follow the *dramatis personae*. Amongst them are King Arthur, "A passionate sort of King, Husband to Queen Dollalolla, of whom he stands a little in Fear"; Tom Thumb the Great; Merlin; Noodle, and Doodle, "Courtiers in Place, and consequently of that party that is uppermost"; Parson, "of the side of the Church"; Glumdalca, Queen of the Giants, who is in love with Tom Thumb; and these two:

"Queen *Dollalolla*, Wife to King Arthur, and Mother to *Huncamunca*, a Woman entirely faultless, saving that she is a little given to Drink; a little too much a Virago towards her Husband, and in Love with Tom Thumb.

"The Princess *Huncamunca*, Daughter to their Majesties King Arthur and Queen *Dollalolla*, of a very sweet, gentle, and amorous Disposition, equally in love with Lord Grizzle and Tom Thumb, and desirous to be married to both."

Tom Thumb

The minor characters are stated to include "Courtiers, Guards, Rebels, Drums, Trumpets, Thunder, and Lightning."

Three extremely strenuous and sanguinary acts ensue: intrigues, wars, assassinations. The language is often drawn from the plays parodied: "extreme" sentences being accumulated with absurd effect. The style may be illustrated by the Queen's speech when she first hears that her daughter is going to marry (she herself is in love with him) Tom Thumb. Everyone remembers how, in the fairy-tale, Tom Thumb narrowly escaped death by falling into a pudding his mother was making:

*Odsbobs! I have a mind to hang myself,
To think I should a Grandmother be made
By such a Raskal—Sure the King forgets
When in a Pudding, by his Mother put
The Bastard, by a Tinker, on a stile
Was drop'd—O, good Lord Grizzle! can I bear
To see him from a Pudding mount the Throne?
Or can, Oh can! my Huncamunca bear
To take a Pudding's Offspring to her Arms*

Which reminds one of the lady in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, who said her daughter should not "contract a marriage with a cloak-room and enter into an alliance with a handbag." A little later Huncamunca, with ludicrous effect and a reminiscence of Romeo and Juliet, cries:

Life and Letters

*O Tom Thumb! Tom Thumb! wherefore art
thou Tom Thumb,*

but that is not, as a single line, equal in effect to the end of Glumdalca's passionate outburst when refused by Tom :

*I'm all within a Hurricane, as if
The World's four winds were pent within my
carcass,
Confusion, Horror, Murder, Guts, and Death.*

A further reminiscence of Shakespeare occurs when the King, at the dread hour of night, encounters the ghost of Tom Thumb's father. He threatens him :

GHOST : *Threaten others with that Word,
I am a ghost, and am already dead.*
KING : *Ye Stars! 'tis well; were thy last
Hour to come,
This Moment had been it. . . .*

In the end, all the characters kill each other. The moral, says the author, is not less excellent than the tale. It teaches " these two instructive lessons, viz., That Human Happiness is exceeding transient, and that Death is the certain end of all Men ; the former whereof is inculcated by the fatal end of Tom Thumb ; the latter, by that of all the other personages."

There are reasons—that is to say, there is a

Tom Thumb

reason—why Tom Thumb should not be revived in the modern theatre; though the unshrinking Stage Society might undertake it. But though this is a pity, it is a greater pity that no one to-day writes anything like it. Fielding's butts are dead and gone. The plays of Young, Banks, Nat Lee, Rowe, are unfamiliar in detail even to most close students of our literature; Jemmy Thomson's great tragedy is remembered only by the immortal line "O Sophonisba, Sophonisba O," which critics (quite justifiably) copy out of each other's books without ever referring to the original; and even the heroic tragedies of Dryden himself are seldom acted, and never, save by Professor Saintsbury, read. But contemporary game exists at which the writer of burlesque might shoot with far more effect and far more profit to his audience.

I remember nothing of the kind being done except the late Mr. Pelissier's Potted Plays. These, though delicious, were very short and paid insufficient attention to the more pretentious kind of modern plays which, like the heroics of Fielding's time, are taken seriously by intelligent people. The epigrammatic social comedy derived from Wilde is common enough to be effectively lampooned; so is the drab bourgeois play descended from Ibsen; so is the rural drama, English, Scotch, Welsh, and Irish, of which the type, and the most successful, is Mr. Masefield's Nan; so is the

Life and Letters

industrial play in which the hard business magnate is at daggers drawn with his employees and his rebellious progeny. Parody on the stage is a neglected art ; but this does not necessarily imply that there is no public for it. And the easiest and most popular thing of all to do would be a musical comedy, in which music, sentiment, and jokes should all burlesque the stuff we have been given for the last twenty years.

SIDELIGHTS ON THE VICTORIANS

“**B**UST by Woolner.” This phrase is familiar enough in catalogues and guide-books, but very few people know who Woolner was or what sort of person he was. Nevertheless, Woolner was one of the original seven members of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. As such he must necessarily be of some interest to the historian of nineteenth century art. And I opened his long-delayed Biography (*Thomas Woolner, His Life in Letters*, Chapman and Hall) in the expectation of learning something new about the Victorian era. By something new I do not mean something really surprising: such as that the great Victorians had blue beards or walked on their heads. What I mean is that I expected something more than the tiny dribble of unknown letters that we usually get in a book published so long after the event as is this one. I have not been disappointed. Woolner’s daughter has had the extremely sensible idea of giving us an idea of his life through the letters he wrote and received, instead of telling us in the first person, and at prodigious length, what her father said to her mother at breakfast on

Life and Letters

November 22, 1870, and recording at length the births, careers, deaths, and tombstones of the various dogs he owned in his life. Woolner corresponded with many of the most eminent men of his time. His most profuse correspondent was Mrs. Tennyson—whose husband, usually referred to here as the Bard, was evidently too lazy to write letters himself—and amongst the others were Rossetti, Coventry Patmore, Carlyle, Mrs. Carlyle, Vernon Lushington and others of the Pre-Raphaelite and Tennysonian sets. The book is a sort of tail-piece to the existing literature of the period, and all future writers about the Victorian age or its principal figures, will find something in it which they will have to quote. It is a noticeable thing—and one that throws a genial light upon Woolner's character—that almost all the hundreds of letters given are familiar and homely in tone. There are very few rhapsodies and there is very little fine writing; when communicating with Woolner people did not pour out their inmost souls, but, on the other hand, they refrained from anything forced or in the nature of humbug. The book as a whole, therefore, though uninspiring is amusing throughout.

Woolner was born in 1825 and died in 1892. In his early years he was the friend of Rossetti, at his death he was an honorary member of a City Company. So it is to be expected that his early correspondence would

Sidelights on the Victorians

be more interesting than his later, and the expectation is fulfilled. Especially good are the letters he received from Rossetti when, having despaired of earning his living as a sculptor, he was seeking his fortune in the gold fields of Australia. Later disciples of the Pre-Raphaelites tended rather to forget that the Pre-Raphaelites were the most robust of men. The apparent discordance between their characters and their works is not difficult to explain. They were artists, they were living in a smug, materialistic world which ignored the finer impulses of the spirit, and they went to extremes. It might almost be said that since the world around them thought of nothing but money, they deliberately painted and wrote about people who could not conceivably earn their livings, and because they saw around them a generation peculiarly gross and bustling they were forced into the extravagance of creating ideal figures who might be deemed incapable of eating, and who in no circumstances could be conceived of as jumping a five-barred gate. But the languorous and swan-necked women of Rossetti, the attenuated, almost transparent, princesses of Burne Jones, the gentle Utopians of William Morris, were merely the escapes, as it were, of full natures starved in actual life. Burne Jones was one of the wittiest and jolliest talkers of the nineteenth century, and filled his letters with uncomplimentary caricatures of

Life and Letters

himself. The most characteristic story about William Morris is that which records the horror of a high ecclesiastic who, after standing a quarter of an hour in the poet's waiting-room, heard a loud voice come down the stairs: "Now send up that bloody bishop." Rossetti, until he took to drugs, was another of the same mould; and it gives one peculiar pleasure to find from Woolner's biography that, even at the beginning, when the Pre-Raphaelites stood to gain everything from the commendation of so celebrated a man, Rossetti could not stand the humbug of that pompous though well-meaning pontiff, John Ruskin. "As," he writes, "he is only half informed about art, anything he says in favour of one's work is, of course, sure to prove invaluable in a professional way." Then very shortly afterwards Woolner subjoins the following remarks:

"I should like Ruskin to know what he never knew—the want of money for a year or two; then he might come to doubt his infallibility and give an artist working on the right road the benefit of any little doubt that might arise. The little despot imagines himself the Pope of Art, and would wear 3 crowns as a right, only they might make him look funny in London!"

Add to this Rossetti's description of his own early and much photogravured *Annunciation* as "my white abomination," and the gentle-

Sidelights on the Victorians

man who bought it as "an Irish maniac," and we get a fairly good indication of the essential healthiness of the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

All through the book there are supplementary scraps for the biographers. In 1857 Woolner wrote to Mrs. Tennyson :

"I was grieved to hear the death of Mr. Barrett, not on the old gentleman's account, but because I know the distress it will occasion to poor Mrs. Browning, who quite worshipped the old man, however unworthy of it he was. He never would be reconciled to her after her marriage, but adopted the somewhat odd plan of hating her for the deed. Poor Mrs. Browning bribed the butler to let her father's dining-room blind remain up a little way that she might obtain one glimpse of him from the street before she started for Florence. She was so weak the poor little creature had to hold on by area rails while she looked her last at her cruel father, then went home and spent the evening in crying.

"Another of the old gentleman's whims was not to allow either of his sons to learn any business or profession."

There is a very typical letter from Carlyle (1864) beginning :

"DEAR WOOLNER—I at once sign and return :—I would even walk in suppliant procession to the Hon. House (if necessary) bare-

Life and Letters

headed and in sackcloth and ashes, entreating said Hon. Long-eared Assembly to deliver us from that most absurd of all Farce-Tragedies daily played under their supervision."

The House of Commons we have always with us. That some politicians have their feelings is, however, shown in the story about Mr. Gladstone and "Granny" Granville weeping, in unison, over one of Tennyson's *Idylls*. This subject is suitable for the pencil of Mr. Max Beerbohm, as is also that other description, given in a letter from the present Lord Tennyson (then a child) of The Bard painting a summer-house. He did it, we are assured, "all by himself." The best story in the book, however, concerns a notability whose name is, unfortunately, not given. He took the sculptor's wife in to dinner and almost completely ignored her. After dinner, in the drawing-room, he came up to her and said: "Mrs. Woolner, if I had known who you were, I should have paid you more attention." Can it have been Sir Willoughby Patterne?

But what of Woolner? The truth is I have been shirking him. He was evidently the friend of great men, and himself a model of all the virtues. He could certainly make good busts, and his early portraits of Tennyson—before the poet became a prophet and covered his beautiful mouth and chin with a Penta-teuchal beard—are masterly. Some of the

116

Sidelights on the Victorians

best are reproduced in this volume: of Sidgwick and Cardinal Newman no stronger or more informative portraits exist than Woolner's. But busts are one thing. Imaginative sculpture is another. Woolner, with something interesting before him, could see what was there and model what he saw, though he usually began prettifying when he was doing a medallion—which he always, irritatingly, called a "med." Genuine creative faculty he had none: no powerful thoughts or passions insisting on expression: nothing more than a taste for the drooping, and a mild affection for the softer virtues. His statues of blind boys, bluecoat boys, Heavenly Welcome, Achilles shouting from the Trenches, Feeding the Hungry, Lady Godiva, and (a very bad one) The Housemaid, are not Pre-Raphaelitism, nor anything else except sheer undiluted, uninspired, smooth, sentimental, degenerate Victorian descendants of Flaxman. Mr. Dombey might have bought any of them in his softer moments, and one is forced to admit that the most interesting thing about Woolner is his diary of two years in the early Australian diggings. It is vividly and vigorously written and, unlike most stories of the sort, it does not conclude its depressing record of failure with the discovery of a nugget as large as a baby's head. Woolner came home richer by nothing save experience, and of that, to all appearance, he made little use.

SIR CHARLES DILKE

IN almost every chapter of Sir Charles Dilke's *Life*, there is enough material for a *Quarterly* article. His experience of, and judgments upon, foreign politics would in themselves make a valuable book. He was in politics for fifty years; was at one time a candidate for the Premiership; he knew and corresponded with what one may call the front benches of five continents, and touched every sphere of social life. His versatility was amazing. At Cambridge he was top of the Law Tripos, President of the Union, and, but for his doctor, would have rowed twice against Oxford. He read, it seems, a large part of the contents of the British Museum; he was asked to do Keats for the "English Men of Letters" series; he travelled, rowed, fenced and dined out almost all his life; and he found time to acquire on every subject of current politics an amount of information which was a storehouse for every individual and organisation that ever worked with him. But if it is quite impossible to review his biography because there is too much in it, from another point of view it is difficult to review it because

Sir Charles Dilke

there is too little. It is largely composed of his own memoirs: but one learns scarcely anything about the essential man from it.

There is an interesting communication here from General Seely, who says that for a long time he could not make out what on earth Dilke was up to; and how at last he found that his only motive was an unselfish desire to help his more unfortunate fellow-men. It cannot but have been that; but the slowness with which General Seely appreciated it is the measure of Dilke's extraordinary reticence. How far his intimates got past this—how far, that is, he ever had an intimate—one cannot tell; but, dead as alive, the outside observer cannot really feel he knows him. All his life he was to some extent a sphinx, though an active and loquacious sphinx. In later years there was an added mystery; for he possessed in the public eye, a special secret, whether it was the secret of his guilt or the secret of his innocence. But, apart from that, he did not disclose himself; and it is possible that he did not even know himself. You can only get at his soul by inference. And this much is certain—and the justice or injustice of his condemnation after the scandal is not relevant here—that no man ever put up a finer show after a knock-down blow. He did not sulk, or take to drink, or even, as he might pardonably have done, retire to the country and read; he faced the music and began a second political

Life and Letters

career, determining by sheer doggedness to induce his country to profit by a desire and ability to serve her which have seldom been united, in such a degree, in a single man. He succeeded so completely that, at the end of his life, the later Dilke had completely obscured the earlier Dilke in men's minds. That is not failure in the private man. And it is arguable that Dilke was not even a comparative failure as a politician. In these later years—his last two Parliaments saw him sitting, straight-backed, beautifully dressed, fortified with many blue-books, with the new Labour Party—he was directly and indirectly responsible for most important reforms, notably the Trade Boards Act. His advice behind the scenes was so freely sought and given that he may properly be regarded as an unofficial leader of the Labour movement. He did far more than he got recognition for; but he had lost the desire for leadership; and, having rehabilitated himself in the eyes of his countrymen, he was not anxious for recognition of any other kind. Influence—to be exercised in the public interest—was what he wanted and got. And it is at least arguable that he would have done little more had nothing gone wrong than he did as things were. For, in spite of his intellectual attainments, integrity and force of character, he had drawbacks which critics, for the moment, seem to have forgotten.

It seems, in short, now to be commonly

Sir Charles Dilke

assumed that had it not been for the Crawford catastrophe, Dilke would have become leader of his party and Prime Minister. Gladstone expected him to be, and Chamberlain had agreed that he should be so on account of his superior authority in the House. Speculation on the point is of the "If Napoleon had won Waterloo" type: you may advance many reasons for whatever view you hold, but you cannot approach proof. But personally, not only do I think that Chamberlain—leaving other candidates out of the question—would have inevitably overtaken Dilke had the partnership lasted and prospered, but I cannot easily persuade myself that anything could have made a Prime Minister out of Dilke. He was a statesman: and he was exceedingly skilful as a mere politician who knew the best way in which to get things done. His knowledge was immense of many kinds. He was fitted for any ministerial post, and had he become, in later years, Foreign Secretary, Colonial Secretary, Secretary for India, Home Secretary, President of the L.G.B., President of the Board of Education, or President of the Board of Trade, he would have known more about any of these jobs than any other politician of his time. Everybody who knew him respected him: most people who met him liked him; his constituents, both in Chelsea and in the Forest of Dean, were exceedingly proud of him. A man to be

Life and Letters

Prime Minister may have far less knowledge, sense and disinterested patriotism than Dilke ; but unless accident has given him the, as it were, automatic support of some strong "interest," local, commercial, social or religious, he must have the power of exciting or amusing, at any rate interesting, the electorate. Dilke's personality was not of the sort which captivates large masses of electors. Writing himself of a speech he made in his twenties, he says :

" It was a dreary speech ; and, given the fact that my speaking was always monotonous, and that at this time I was trying specially to make speeches which no one could call empty noise, and was therefore specially and peculiarly heavy, there was something amusing to lovers of contrast in that between the stormy heartiness of my reception at most of these meetings, and the ineffably dry orations which I delivered to them—between cheers of joy when I rose and cheers of relief when I sat down."

This was a peculiar occasion, for the discussion over the Civil List had given Sir Charles a fleeting reputation as a Republican fire-eater and the audiences assembled in a state of excitement. As a rule, you got the " ineffably dry " speech without the cheers. In his last ten years his habits of discursiveness

Sir Charles Dilke

and droning had got so acute that he was impossible to follow. Whatever the subject—and it might be anything from Army organisation to the sweated chainmakers of Cradley Heath—he would stand up and pour out thousands of facts in a monotonous, gruff boom, his words periodically becoming inaudible as he buried his head in his notes or turned round to pick up a profusely annotated blue-book from his seat. The Minister concerned would stay; a few experts on the particular subject under discussion would compel themselves to attend, knowing that his matter was bound to be valuable if they could only get the hang of it; the rest would go.

His character was universally respected; he was admired as a repository of information and wisdom, and a young member, of whatever party, who was congratulated by him upon a speech got a more genuine pleasure out of his praises than from any perfunctory compliments from the front benches. Nevertheless, nothing could stop his audiences from dwindling away or his voice from lulling the survivors to sleep. He knew that his voice was monotonous: that he could not help. But he had also an intellectual disability which made him treat every small fact as if it were of equal value to almost any other fact, and a pronounced temperamental disinclination to be “rhetorical.” He was too reticent to show his personality: and he would not manufacture

Life and Letters

a sham personality for public exhibition. He hated importing feeling into his speeches, however strong might be the passion for justice or mercy behind them: he deliberately refused to make an easy appeal by frequent reference to "first principles" or cultivate those arts of expression whereby politics may be made enjoyable to bodies of men, or even those arts of arrangement whereby they may be made simple and comprehensible. He felt all these things to be humbug, and humbug was abhorrent to him: failing to observe that, since under our system speeches are an important part of a controversialist's career and of a minister's administration, it is the business of a man who would lead his countrymen to pay some attention—unless he is a demagogue born—to the technique of "rhetoric." In private conversation Dilke is reported to have been one of the most interesting men of his age. But on the platform and in the House of Commons he was distinctly and undeniably dull. And it is possible that England would not have stood a Radical Prime Minister who sent her to sleep.

THE UTOPIAN SATIRIST

MR. CHARLES WHIBLEY has published, through the University Press, the Leslie Stephen Lecture delivered by him at Cambridge. It was a good lecture, if rather permeated with Mr. Whibley's political cranks; and its chief object is to show that Macaulay and other critics have been hopelessly astray in describing Swift as a low and beastly ruffian who hated human society and was emphatically unfit for it.

Mr. Whibley is, of course, right. Macaulay and Thackeray were completely wrong. I do not think it is quite just to say that Macaulay's opinion was founded on Whig prejudices: far more probably it arose from sheer disgust at Swift's frequent filthiness, and from misapprehension of his custom of representing men, when he was attacking them, as larded with all the disagreeable concomitants of the sty. But vilely as he abused mankind, and habituated though he may have become to exaggerated invective, his first impulse was an idealistic one. He detested men, not because they were men, but because they were not the men they might be. When he called

Life and Letters

himself a misanthrope, he went on to explain that he intended to prove "the falsity of that definition *animal rationale*, and to show it should be only *rationis capax*." He uses his communities in *Gulliver* to expose in the most savage way the defects of Western civilisation: but can those who call this "cynical" deny that the defects were there? Mr. Whibley refers very properly to his acceptance of the "generous creed" of the King of Brobdingnag, "that whoever could make two ears of corn, or two blades of grass, to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country, than the whole race of politicians put together." Mr. Whibley himself has so marked a disbelief in all politicians that he allows this "simple doctrine" to stand by itself. But the Utopia in Swift's heart even had room for better politicians. Take the introduction to the school of political projectors in Laputa:

"In the school of political projectors I was but ill entertained, the professors appearing in my judgment wholly out of their senses, which is a scene that never fails to make me melancholy. These unhappy people were proposing schemes for persuading monarchs to choose favourites upon the score of their wisdom, capacity, and virtue; of teaching ministers to

The Utopian Satirist

consult the public good ; of rewarding merit, great abilities, eminent services ; of instructing princes to know their true interest by placing it on the same foundation with that of their people ; of choosing for employments persons qualified to exercise them ; with many other wild impossible chimaeras, that never entered before into the heart of man to conceive, and confirmed in me the old observation, that there is nothing so extravagant and irrational which some philosophers have not maintained for truth."

It is surely obvious that these are not the sentences of a hater of mankind, but those of one who was continually haunted and tormented by the undeveloped possibilities of mankind. Man is "capable of reason"—and will not use it. Swift himself stated that he would "forfeit his life, if any one opinion can be fairly deduced from that book, [*The Tale of a Tub*] which is contrary to Religion or Morality." It depends, of course, upon what you mean by Religion ; and a clergyman of the Established Church was, to say the least, unorthodox when he informed the Houyhnhms that "difference of opinions hath cost many millions of lives ; for instance, whether flesh be bread, or bread be flesh ; whether the juice of a certain berry be blood or wine." But generally speaking, his claim was not absurd. Even his obscenities could scarcely give anyone

Life and Letters

a taste for the obscene, and, comprehensive though his irony is, he seldom if ever jeers at genuine virtue or makes sport of suffering. As Mr. Whibley suggests, it is conceivable that his ironic method has misled people; though how anyone in his senses could have supposed that he meant to be taken literally when he argued that the superfluous children of the poor Irish should be exported for food, it is difficult to conceive. Some, at least, of his contemporaries gave him credit for good intentions. The Irish, at one period, would have risen in rebellion had the Government attacked him. Pope, Harley and Bolingbroke knew the warmth of his affections. And an obscure publisher, who printed his poems, after remarking on the savagery with which he had written about women and Whigs, thought fit to add: "We have been assured by several judicious and learned gentlemen, that what the author hath here writ, on either of those two Subjects, hath no other Aim than to reform the Errors of both Sexes." Surely a large and a lofty aim!

The same bookseller, in the same apology, made another true, if oddly expressed, observation: "Whatever he writ, whether good, bad or indifferent, is an Original in itself." Swift was one of the most natural writers we have ever had. He did not bother at all about his sentences: he had a quick, vivid, witty, logical mind, and his style has precisely those

The Utopian Satirist

qualities. Mr. Whibley justly compares him to Defoe, both for his easy simplicity and for his power of realistic narrative. To make one believe in *Gulliver's Travels* was an even greater feat than that of convincing one that Robinson Crusoe really did keep his hold on the rock till the waves abated, land, build a hut, read the Bible to his parrot, make a hat out of goat-skins and see a cannibal's footprints on the sand. But Swift does it, and with the most wonderfully cunning touches of verisimilitude. How pathetically true Gulliver's longing, when amongst the kindly giants of Brobdingnag, to be "among people with whom I could converse upon even terms, and walk about the streets and fields without fear of being trod to death like a frog or a young puppy"; and still more that other flash:

"I likewise broke my right shin against the shell of a snail, which I happened to stumble over, as I was walking alone, and thinking on poor England."

But Defoe, outside straight narration, was clumsy. His satires are almost unreadable. Swift was a supreme ironist: he was as great at saying something by saying its opposite as he was at direct story-telling. That he should have chosen irony as his method of attacking abuses was natural.

For he was, at bottom, a very reticent man.

Life and Letters

His friends had often to deduce his good heart from his good deeds, and even in the letters to Stella he usually keeps to the superficies of gossip and scandal. His anger was terrific when it broke out. The most amiable of men with his friends, there was a passion in him which men feared, something in him, it may be, he even feared himself; though it was to that he owed the concentrate force of expression which must have been his chief source of delight. *Vive la bagatelle* is the motto (it was his) of a miserable man. Swift *was* a miserable man; but the causes of his misery, however obscure they may be, were not petty ones. Men are seldom great through being unhappy; Swift is almost unique in English literature in that his unhappiness was not the effect but the source of his power. The "fierce indignation" that, on his own statement, consumed him, had to manifest itself in grim jokes instead of exalted rhapsodies. At any rate, the ironical method became second nature to him. And it has delightful results in a small way as well as magnificent results in a large way. He was a master of under-statement. "Yesterday I saw a woman flayed, and you cannot imagine how it altered her appearance for the worse." The little incidental jests are scattered all over his minor controversial writings; and even in the most necessary preface he took every opportunity of gravely pulling the reader's, or even his own leg. One such he defended

The Utopian Satirist

(speaking as one of "The Multitude of writers, whereof the whole Multitude of Writers most reasonably complains") on the ground that :

"It makes a considerable Addition to the Bulk of the Volume, a Circumstance by no Means to be neglected by a skilful writer,"

which is an extremely modern thought. "Whatever," he added, "word or sentence is printed in a different character, shall be judged to contain something extraordinary either of wit or sublime." He was, in his queer way, a dreamer ; he was a master of English ; a great realist ; and a great wit. And if a man should still think he went too far in his exposure of the race of "little odious vermin," to which he belonged, let him remember two things. One is that Swift projected a work entitled *A Modest Defence of the Proceedings of the Rabble in All Ages*. The other is Swift's own despairing reflection, that "there is not, through all Nature, another so callous and insensible a Member as the World's Posteriors, whether you apply to it the Toe or the Birch."

JANE AUSTEN'S CENTENARY

JANE AUSTEN died on July 18, 1817, at the age of forty-one. She began writing early; *Pride and Prejudice*, a mature work, was finished when she was twenty-one. But novel-writing was, to her, in a sense a recreation, like another: and she left only four long books, two short ones, and two fragments. These mean so much to her admirers that one of them has seriously suggested that a man's worth can be estimated once and for all by his ability to appreciate her. She had a most "uneventful" life, and we know very little about it. Yet those who like her feel that they know her more intimately than any other writer. To those who have not read her, she is merely a woman with a name like a governess, who lived at the same period as Maria Edgeworth (another of the same sort) and wrote books with titles such as *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility*, which stamp them as moral treatises of the worst and most edifying kind. But to those who know her she is unique, a delightful secret, a secret shared by thousands of people.

Miss Austen lived—as an author—in greater seclusion perhaps than any other English

Jane Austen's Centenary

writer. She knew no celebrities and corresponded with none : her name did not appear on her title-pages : and her fame did not become considerable until after her death. During the last year or two of her life her books sold fairly well, and she received, with equanimity, two tokens of appreciation. The *Quarterly* published a considerable review of her work, and the Prince Regent's Librarian, writing on behalf of his illustrious employer, asked for the dedication of *Emma*. Miss Austen assented, and inscribed the book to the Regent : upon which the Librarian, encouraged, wrote again, suggesting that the author's gifted pen might properly be employed upon " an historical romance illustrative of the august House of Coburg," which was about to be united, by a holy bond, with the Royal House of England. It is not easy to persuade oneself that George IV. was Jane Austen's only point of contact with the great world : it is absolutely impossible to imagine what a German historical novel by her would have been like. She could not imagine it either : she explained to the Librarian that she could not undertake any story in which it would be improper to laugh. Treatises with a serious object were not in her line. " I think," she said, " I may boast myself to be, with all possible vanity, the most unlearned and uninformed female who ever dared to be an authoress."

Life and Letters

This is, of course, an exaggeration: and even had it been literally true at that date, she would have lost her proud pre-eminence ten thousand times over by now. She was fairly widely read in history and literature: and amongst her other accomplishments, as her nephew proudly relates, were embroidery of the most masterly kind, spillikins, and cup-and-ball, at which she once caught the ball a hundred times running. One would expect this: she was a human being before she was a woman of intellect: and her propensity for entering into the occupations and amusements of her circle is of a piece with her preference to write about the world she lived in rather than about the myriad worlds she did not live in. Her brain was good enough for anything, but she did not employ it in speculation or controversy or the promiscuous acquisition of facts. One remembers the education of the two Misses Bertram, who thought themselves so superior to Fanny Price:

“How long ago it is, aunt, since we used to repeat the chronological order of the Kings of England, with the dates of their accession, and most of the principal events of their reigns!”

“Yes,” added the other; “and of the Roman Emperors as low as Severus; besides a great deal of the human mythology, and all the metals, semi-metals, planets, and distinguished philosophers.”

Jane Austen's Centenary

There has been no critic so desperate as to suggest that she was the product of the French Revolution. Her complete detachment from the Great War, which raged throughout her writing career, has often been mentioned. She hoped her brothers or characters in the Navy might pick up a little prize-money: and there her interest ceased. She and her family and her neighbours and her heroines were in Chawton or Meryton, Bath or Lyme Regis: and those arenas were quite large enough for the display of the general affections and particular idiosyncrasies of men and women. She limited her art still further: she dealt only with her own social class, and its outskirts. She must have known farmers and cottagers well enough: but they never appear as characters in her books. It is evident, therefore, that her limitations of subject were as much a matter of deliberate choice as of opportunity. The genteel families of a country town, the officers of a militia regiment, the local clergy, a great landlord or two, and a sprinkling of governesses and sailor sons on leave: these materials she found quite sufficient for her picture of life.

England has had few such finished artists. There is only one conspicuous weakness in her books. It is not true that she could draw women, but not men: her subsidiary men are as good as her subsidiary women. But her heroes are shadowy and unsatisfactory com-

Life and Letters

pared with her heroines. All her novels were written from the heroine's standpoint. In *Pride and Prejudice* the author may almost be said to look at the world through Elizabeth Bennet's eyes: in all the other books she is standing, as it were, at the side of her heroines. She knows them intimately: she never troubles to give us the inner history of the young men with whom they are in love. All the other persons around them are illuminated and made familiar by the lamp of comedy that is turned on them. This operation cannot be wholeheartedly performed on the young lovers; and even the most impressive of them, Mr. Knightley, and the nicest of them, Commander Wentworth, are rather vague and unexplored. We can deduce the rest of Mr. Bennet from what Miss Austen shows us: Darcy's personality has great blanks like the old maps of Africa. We have to assume that Darcy, since Miss Austen thought him worthy of Elizabeth Bennet, was an exceptionally fine man: but we know very little about him except that when the plot necessitates it he behaves like a pig, and when the plot necessitates it he behaves like a chivalrous gentleman. This weakness, however, is remarkably little inconvenience to the reader. We are prepared to take these young men at Miss Austen's valuation: the hearts of the women are quite sufficiently exposed to make the love-stories interesting; and in any case the love-affairs are not the

Jane Austen's Centenary

only props of the books. Their first interest lies in the vision they give us of the everyday life of ordinary families, in the inexhaustible interest drawn from the apparently humdrum by a woman of genius. Her people are the people we know. The Georgian setting of harpsichords, muddy roads, Chippendale, hahas and Empire dresses, does not make them archaic: it merely makes clearer their permanent modernity, the endurance of types of character, of human "humours," impulses, small deceptions and generousities, and mannerisms of speech and gesture. There must have been Miss Eltons, Sir Walter Elliots and Miss Bateses in Athens: they must exist in Samarkand: and one might quite conceivably forget whether one had read about Mary Bennet and her mother in a book or met them at Cheltenham. There they all are, scores of them. We know little directly of their souls: nor do we of most people with whom we dine or drink tea. But few of them—Collins and Lady Catherine, one admits, are Dickens characters—are less real than our acquaintances. And, through Miss Austen, we get far more amusement out of them than we do out of our acquaintances. For Miss Austen had sharper eyes than we.

Nobody has excelled her interiors, or invented such exquisite beginnings and endings. She gets one intrigued in the first sentence, yet without the least effort. And no great

Life and Letters

writer of English has kept his English up with so little apparent effort. The quiet tune of her sentences is never broken, yet never gets dull. She always uses the right word, yet never with the appearance of having searched for it, and the felicities of her humour are inexhaustible. "Mr. Knightley seemed to be trying not to smile; and succeeded, without difficulty, upon Mrs. Elton's beginning to talk to him." They are usually as quiet as that: they produce warm flickering smiles as one passes. It is hopeless to attempt to illustrate them here: or to show how discriminating is her sarcasm and how sweet and sympathetic is the spirit underneath it. She was in the line of Addison and Goldsmith, uniting immense sense with great sensibility. Amid the tropical forest of the Romantic movement, she flourished, the most perfect flower of the eighteenth century.

MR. CONRAD'S MASTERPIECE

MR. JOSEPH CONRAD is now admitted to be one of the greatest living writers in our language. It took him a long time to get his due from any but a small public. It is with something of a shock that one reads that *Lord Jim*, of which Messrs. Dent have published a new six shilling edition, was written over twenty years ago, and appeared in book form in 1901. What were the masterpieces which, in that year, overshadowed it? Why was not Mr. Conrad at that stage recognised as the equal of Hardy and Meredith, whose names, bracketed together, used to appear in the reviews *ad nauseam*? I speak with the freedom of one who at that period was not a professional critic.

Lord Jim is the story of a man's successful endeavour to rehabilitate himself. The book opens with his failure. With a few other white men he is taking a crowded pilgrim ship, the *Patna*, across the Indian Ocean. On a perfectly still moonlit night she strikes a derelict and her forward compartment, screened only by a rusty old bulkhead, is flooded. Only the officers know. All over the

Life and Letters

deck the half-naked pilgrims sleep, sighing and moaning in the heat. The German captain and three companions hurry off in a boat : and at the last moment Jim, undeliberately, automatically, jumps in after them. The ship, as it happens, does not go down ; there is an enquiry, and the deserters have their certificates taken away. But to Jim the important thing is not this ; it is the knowledge that he has failed to live up to the code ; the loss of honour in other men's eyes and still more in his own ; his unworthiness of his native civilisation and of the service. Wherever he goes, taking odd jobs in Asiatic ports, his story follows him ; and once it has turned up, even though men are ready enough to palliate it, he vanishes. He goes always eastward, always hankering for a chance of confirming his conviction that he is equal to the greatest calls that can be made upon him. And in the end, among savage Malays in the interior of an East Indian island, he gets satisfaction. He lives to know what it is to be absolutely trusted by men and dies celebrating a " pitiless wedding with a shadowy ideal of conduct."

There is no need in a review to disclose the details of this story. But those who think *Lord Jim* Mr. Conrad's greatest book will at least meet with no objection from the author, and Mr. Conrad's best is equal to the best of any other living man. As an achievement in

Mr. Conrad's Masterpiece

construction, it is in the first rank. Mr. Conrad's method is, as usual, bizarre. The story is begun by the author ; then taken up by his favourite narrator Marlow, who, on an Eastern hotel verandah, tells what he has seen of Jim, and what he has picked up from others, to a chance group of men lying on cane chairs in the darkness, smoking and drinking ; and it ends with documents, written by Marlow and Jim, received by one of those listening men years afterwards, in a London flat. Each subsidiary contributor to the story is clearly described in his special digression, and there are constant side-stories. Yet the impression with which one finishes is one of unity, harmony, perfect proportion. There are one or two minor flaws, but they are so insignificant as to be hardly worth mentioning. The digressions are not too long ; the pains taken with characters only slightly connected with Jim are not wasted, as they always contribute to the picture of the background against which he lived and the world which played upon his feelings and thoughts.

The book contains a large, if floating, population of portraits. No figure, save Jim's, goes the whole way through. The others come and go under the rays of the lamp which follows him from Aden to India, from Hong-kong to the Moluccas ; smart captains, drunken outcasts, ships'-chandlers, merchants, hotel-keepers ; "Gentleman Brown," the pirate ;

Life and Letters

Egström and Blake, the quarrelsome partners ; Stein, the tall and studious old German trader, with his quiet house, his great tropical garden and his collection of butterflies ; and the notabilities of Patusan, the cringing Rajah, the mean half-breed Cornelius, massive old Doramin, with his ponderous elbows held up by servants, the mysterious and pathetic girl whom Jim marries, and Dain Waris, who reminds one of the noble young Malay in *Almayer's Folly*. Jim, himself, always remains a little vague. Mr. Conrad's preoccupation with his hero's dominant idea, as deduced from his actions by other people, resulted in Jim being inadequately disclosed. But the more rapid portraits are all perfect. And in no book of Mr. Conrad's is a greater variety of scenes so surely sketched. There is little elaborate set description. The account of the pilgrim ship's voyage under the sun and moon across the flat ocean, "evenly ahead, without a sway of her bare masts, cleaving continuously the great calm of the waters under the inaccessible serenity of the sky," is magnificently, almost intolerably vivid. But when the narrative comes nominally from Marlow, the descriptions must be kept within bounds, lest the stretched illusion of speech should snap. Even so on almost every page some beautiful—and usually terribly beautiful—scene is bitten into one's mind, and the whole region of Patusan, the town on

Mr. Conrad's Masterpiece

piles, the interminable gloomy forest, the moon rising between a chasm in the hills, the muddy waters, the marshes, the stagnant air, and the immense blue sea round the river's last bend, is pieced gradually together so that one remembers it as though oneself had been there. And it is all done in English of a grave music which, from one to whom our language is not native, is miraculous.

I think, however, that the book's greatest quality is a moral one. Like the late Henry James, Mr. Conrad scarcely ever preaches, yet is in the best sense a didactic writer. He is capable of speculation about conduct: there is an immense amount of it behind this story. But he brings something else than curiosity and agility of intellect to the discussion. "Hang ideas!" exclaims Marlow, in a half-serious aside. "They are tramps, vagabonds knocking at the back-door of your mind, each taking a little of your substance, each carrying away some crumb of that belief in a few simple notions you must cling to if you want to die decently and would like to live easy." It is rather too stark a statement; but it is at least a half-truth. Take Jim's act of cowardice, for example. A good many of our modern moralists, with their mania for destroying the things by which men have lived well for countless generations, would probably argue that he did right in jumping into the boat. The others had gone; the ship, as far

Life and Letters

as he knew, would infallibly sink ; there was no earthly chance of his saving the panic-stricken passengers if he stayed ; and in any case a man is not responsible for an automatic impulse. Other and darker men would even argue that, as the representative of a higher civilisation, a strong and enlightened man, Jim was even doing his duty to the world by escaping instead of sacrificing himself for the sake of a lot of besotted and dirty Moslems on their way to Mecca. Such arguments, though not until our own time have philosophies been constructed out of them, are not new. They are familiar to every man in the shape of inner promptings. We have all lapsed ; we all remember things we are ashamed of, cowardices which we cannot forget ; and we are familiar enough with the voices which say, "What does it matter ?" "To yourself you are the most important thing," "Forget it," "Why bother, since nobody knows," and, very subtly, "It is a man's first duty to be prudent." Circumstances made of Lord Jim, especially at the end, an extreme case. But all the same he was typical. A man's self-respect can only be restored in one way : by doing the second time what he has failed to do the first. A civilisation in which men should spend their time promiscuously undermining traditional loves and loyalties by imperfect syllogisms would rot to pieces. If you believe this, even at the

Mr. Conrad's Masterpiece

risk of encountering the last and supposedly worst charge of being a sentimentalist, you take the romantic view of life: and you will have Mr. Conrad on your side. His books, in spite of all the blood and thunder, both metaphorical and literal, that there is in them, in spite of the black skies behind their lightnings, and the brooding sense of evil that pervades his meditations, are an incitement to decent living. I do not know what his nominal religion is, or if he professes any; he is obviously perplexed and oppressed by the cruelty and pain of things. But if he sees behind the world a pit "black as the night from pole to pole," he finds consolation not in the insane and pathetic assertion that he is master of his own Fate, but "in a few simple notions you must cling to," which the race, after some thousands of years of experience, has discovered to be more effective.

FOUR PAPERS ON SHAKESPEARE

I

Shakespeare's Workmanship

WHAT a pleasure it is to get a book on Shakespeare and know before you open it that it will be fresh, frank, and sensible, free at once from old fustian and from new fantasies, and certain to send you back to read your author with increased understanding and enjoyment! Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's *Shakespeare's Workmanship* has all the merits of his previous works and the additional attraction of the greatest subject a literary critic can write about.

Sir Arthur treats Shakespeare as a human artist, though the greatest: a man capable of indolence, wilful caprice, and occasional ineptitude: an artist working, like others, under limitations, unwilling (as great artists are) to repeat old triumphs, always attacking new difficulties, and sometimes (as in that last group of plays which cover long periods of time and deal with slow spiritual processes)

Shakespeare's Workmanship

failing to surmount them. With so full a book before him the reviewer can do no more than quote and criticise a few things at random. Sir Arthur throws light on every play and on the principles of art in general; the study of "workmanship" gives him a very wide reference with limits difficult to determine. He is extraordinarily good on *Hamlet*, in which he says, after all the wiseacres have dowered Shakespeare with all their philosophies and pathologies, there is no "mystery" whatever—except the slight unsolved and usually unnoticed mystery as to why the murdered king was succeeded by his brother, and not by his son. He notes in the *Merchant of Venice* how Shakespeare was handicapped by his ready-made and preposterous plots about the pound of flesh and the casket. They gave him little room for the natural development of character; he had to concentrate on Shylock or Portia. There ought, says Sir Arthur, "to be a close time" for the discussion of the Trial Scene.

Discussing criticisms made against the weaknesses and complexities of *Cymbeline*, he says, justly, that what Shakespeare did in that play was to create Imogen, the loveliest and noblest heroine in all literature; and that since he did so rare a thing we may assume that that is what he was chiefly trying to do. *As You Like It* elicits the remark that it is "arguable of the greatest creative artists that, however

Life and Letters

they learn and improve, they are always trading on the stored memories of childhood."

There is one play about which, exercising a reader's right with the utmost deference and diffidence, I dare to differ from Sir Arthur and from the majority of critics. I do not think *Macbeth* entirely comes off. Sir Arthur remarks, and this indisputable truth has been disastrously forgotten by many modern playwrights, that whatever a "hero" is, does, or suffers, it is essential that he should command the sympathies of the audience. He sets forth all the case against *Macbeth*, and adds that the great poetry which is put into his mouth "drapes him with the illusion of greatness," but that this is not enough, and that he is only saved by being represented as a victim of some fatal hallucination of undefined strength imposed on him by evil supernatural powers. I thoroughly agree with Sir Arthur's attack on those who under-estimate the importance of the supernatural element in the play, and who fail to understand the spell that a story like that of the witches on the blasted heath must exercise on all imaginative minds. I agree with his diagnosis of Shakespeare's problem here and of the means he adopted to solve it. Where I differ from him is in holding, unlike him, that Shakespeare failed. There was I think, a double failure. Easy though Shakespeare found it to write great speeches and impute them to any character, it was not

Shakespeare's Workmanship

so easy to convince us that that character really spoke them. The great imaginative passages spoken by Hamlet, by Prospero, and by the raving Lear, we can accept not as Shakespeare's, but as theirs: they spring directly from their intellects and emotions as we know them; they are more intense than their contexts, but all of a piece with them. These men have no need to be "draped" with the illusion of greatness, for they *are* great. With Macbeth it is different. When he says things like

*And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death*

the great language *is* a "drapery." It hangs loosely and awkwardly upon him; it does not belong to him; the greatness is Shakespeare's, and not his; the illusion is not produced. Macbeth is not made great by the mere loan of a poet's imagery, and he is not made sympathetic, however adequately his crime may be explained and palliated, by being the victim of a hallucination. We might feel very deeply with such a victim had he won our affection or admiration previous to his hallucination or were he, outside that, a fine fellow; but this man has never attracted us at all; and though any weak doomed man must arouse some measure of pity, our interest in Macbeth is nothing compared with that which we feel

Life and Letters

in Hamlet and Othello and Lear, and even less than that which is stirred by his inexcusable and unhallucinated, but tigerishly resolute, lady.

The principal character in *Macbeth*, in fact, is dull; he makes no appeal; we do not greatly mind what happens to him; and the play, in spite of sublime scenes and poetry, is an illustration and a warning to artists who deny, or forget, that no powers of execution and no subordinate achievement can compensate for a central figure who is "unsympathetic," and that it is better for a "hero" to provoke active fear or hate than indifference or half-contemptuous pity. It is no use having a hero who makes people feel, from first to last, that he wants a good shaking. The mistake was not one that Shakespeare usually made; but his plot beat him. The emotional hold of the play would have been immeasurably greater had he set Macbeth against an equally prominent but lovable character: given him, say, an innocent, horror-stricken wife instead of a fellow-murderer who is not only as incapable as he of drawing our affection, but who incidentally throws him into the shade as a criminal.

The end of *Othello*—on which Sir Arthur barely touches—is a subtler matter; whether one thinks the workmanship fails depends upon whether one believes that the most noble and generous Othello, even though a

Shakespeare's Workmanship

Moor, and deceived, and mad with jealousy really could have—did, in fact—kill his wife. Men in such situations, no doubt, have killed guiltless wives, and some of these men have possibly been strong and lovable people. But I, at least, experience when I come to that death, not those feelings which one has when a tragedy works to its inevitable and natural climax, but, mingled with sickening horror for poor little Desdemona, anger and irritation not against Othello, but against Shakespeare, who is directing him. Sir Arthur, in his brief parenthesis on the play, quotes a lady as having shouted to Othello from the auditorium: "You great black fool; can't you *see*?" What I feel like saying, and I can't think my impressions are unique, is not that, but: "Look here, Shakespeare, you'd no right to do this merely because, before you started, you decided that this was the way the story should go. You know better. You're monkeying with human nature, and you've no excuse."

Sir Arthur's readers must hope that he will supplement this volume with another covering—with whatever central theme—those plays which are not studied in this volume. There is one, I think, which really should have been here, the main characteristics of Shakespeare's technical aims and achievements being the subject. That play is *Troilus and Cressida*. Too little attention has always been given to

Life and Letters

it; and those critics who have, at length, written about it have concentrated too much upon the love-story—drawing, incidentally, from this quite convincing picture of a fickle girl and an embittered lover unjustifiable deductions about Shakespeare's frame of mind when he wrote it.

The chief interest of the play, and certainly its chief interest as a piece of "workmanship," seems to me to lie in its vividness as a panorama, as a series of suddenly illuminated scenes in which many characters, Greek and Trojan, live and move, each with his distinct face and opinions and temper. It resembles one of those bright and crowded "compartment" pictures that the early Flemings painted. If both Troilus and Cressida were left out, the siege of Troy, in sections, would remain; and I cannot think (and I am sure Sir Arthur would not think) that in making that great tapestry Shakespeare did not know what he was doing, and know that, in drama, it was a novel and difficult thing.

II

The Blackamoor

IN the last paper I made some remarks about *Othello*. I will not inflict a literal repetition of these upon my readers (if, as the modest editor said, any such there be), but the gist of them was that the end

The Blackamoor

of the play was not convincing. I argued that, although some men might kill their wives out of jealousy, the Othello whom we have got to know in the play, passionate though he is, would not have done it. All round, it is not an inevitable, but a forced—even a faked—ending, however this may be disguised by the verisimilitude of Shakespeare's detail and the natural splendours of his language. I had never examined the sources of the play, but I thought that probably the plot as Shakespeare found it hampered him: that Othello murdered his wife "in the original," and that the dramatist made him do it in his play in spite of the fact that as the play developed Othello's character grew into something quite unlike that of the murderer. I have now looked up the original, and find confirmation of the theory.

The story is taken from a collection of fables (*Hecatommithi*) by Giovanbattista Giraldi, called Cinthio, who was a University professor at Ferrara, and published his book in 1565. Each tale was supposed to illustrate a moral virtue, but which virtue was illustrated by the story of Othello my informant (the Yale Shakespeare) sayeth not. The book was not translated into English, so far as we know; the conclusion being (we are used to these puzzling deductions about Shakespeare) that either Shakespeare knew Italian, French, or Spanish, or else he heard the story at second

Life and Letters

hand. In Cinthio's tale, "Disdemona" is the only person with a name. Othello is "the Moor"; Iago is "the Ensign"; Cassio, "the Captain"; Emilia, "the Ensign's wife"; and Bianca, "a courtesan." Disdemona, against her parents' wishes, marries the valiant Moorish general, and insists on going with him to Cyprus. Mark what follows. Iago falls in love with Disdemona, who is attached to Iago's wife. Failing to seduce her, Iago ascribes his failure to Cassio. Cassio gets into disgrace for striking a soldier; Disdemona intercedes for him, and this gives Iago his cue. He tells Othello that Disdemona is in love with Cassio and "has taken an aversion to your blackness." The handkerchief plot is developed, and the Moor, convinced, "fell to meditating how he should put his wife to death, and likewise the Captain, *so that their death should not be laid to his charge.*"

Then, Iago and Othello together "consulted of one means and another"—poison and daggers—to kill Disdemona, but could come to no conclusion. At last the ingenious Ensign said: "A plan comes to my mind, which will give you satisfaction and raise cause for no suspicion. It is this: the house in which you live is very old, and the ceiling of your chamber has many cracks; I propose we take a stocking filled with sand, and beat Disdemona with it till she dies; thus will her

The Blackamoor

body bear no signs of violence. When she is dead we can pull down a portion of the ceiling, and thus make it seem as if a rafter falling on her head had killed the lady. Suspicion cannot rest on you, since all men will impute her death to accident." The Moor was *pleased* with this advice, and accepted it. One night, when he and Disdemona were in bed, the Ensign, who had been concealed in a closet opening into the chamber, made a noise, according to plan. The Moor said to his wife: "Did you not hear that noise?"

"Indeed, I heard it," she replied.

"Rise," said the Moor, "and see what 'tis."

Disdemona got out of bed, and as she approached the closet the other villain rushed out "and beat her cruelly with the bag of sand across her back, upon which Disdemona fell to the ground, scarcely able to draw her breath"; but with the little voice she had left, she called upon the Moor for aid. But the Moor, leaping from the bed, exclaimed: "Thou wickedest of women, thus has thy falseness found its just reward." The poor lady protests her innocence, but Iago keeps pounding her until she is senseless. The two men then lay her on the bed, wounded her head, and pulled down the ceiling of the room. Then the Moor shouts that the house is falling down, and the neighbours come running in to

Life and Letters

find Desdemona dead under a rafter. The two murderers escape suspicion at the time. Othello gets to hate Iago, fears to kill him, but disgraces him. Iago then tells Cassio about the crime, and both the murderers come ultimately to bad ends. "Thus did Heaven avenge the innocence of Desdemona"—and demonstrate, as I suppose, the Italian moralist contends, that it is unwise and unsafe to murder one's wife.

This plot, accepted as Shakespeare's chief source, illuminates three remarkable things. The first is Shakespeare's genius for clothing bare bones; the second is his wonderful sense for noticing weaknesses in his originals, and remedying them; and the third is his occasional failure (as I choose to think it) to let that sense guide him all the way. He saw that Cinthio's Othello was quite impossible as a hero. He could not be kept on that footing with Iago; the disgustingly calculated confederate murder was impossible; Othello could not, if he was to obtain any sympathy, be the sort of man who would survive and indulge in recriminations with a blackmailing accomplice. Turn to the death-scene in the play:

*It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul ;
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars !
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
156*

The Blackamoor

*And smooth as monumental alabaster.
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
Put out the light, and then put out the light :
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me ; but once put out thy light,
Thou cunningst pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume.*

So to the most beautiful and awful dialogue, the greatest dialogue in Shakespeare, and its close "But while I say one prayer!" "It is too late." That is what takes the place of Cinthio's abomination. Cinthio was scrapped. Othello's character was remade. He grew, under Shakespeare's hands, one of the noblest and most generous of men, a husband worthy of his wife. But he grew too noble and generous, and though Shakespeare used all the resources of his incomparable art to palliate and explain the crime, though the murder in the play is committed by a demented man whose reason has temporarily been destroyed by the breaking of his ideal, and who immediately afterwards kills himself in remorse :

*I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee ; no way but this,
Killing myself to die upon a kiss,*

he did not succeed in making us feel that the thing, granted the characters, *had* to happen. Othello, I am heretic enough to think, should

have ended happily, and been grouped with the "Comedies." But though Shakespeare took every sort of liberty with what, when he found it, was little more than a crude anecdote, it did not occur to him, or he did not choose, to alter the end, which—when he first began the play—was no doubt the thing which, by its dramatic possibilities, attracted him and towards which he was all the time working up.

It is one more illustration of Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's theory that Shakespeare was occasionally hampered by his plots. Sir Arthur's own chief illustration is drawn from the *Merchant of Venice*, where the silly arrangements about the caskets and the pound of flesh—which would never have sprung from the imagination of a Shakespeare, but were indolently retained since they were found in his original—hampered him badly, crippled his characterisation, and compelled him to concentrate upon a few persons and a few scenes for his really great effects. The conclusion is that, like Homer, Shakespeare sometimes nods: an admission that need not be left to those iconoclasts who, not knowing the greatest plays and the greatest poetry in the world when they see them, spend their time attempting to convince people that the general reverence for Shakespeare is absurd and that his plays are no better than anyone else's. The late Tolstoy was one of these.

Hamlet

III

Hamlet

MR. J. M. ROBERTSON will not, I hope, be again returned to Parliament, if election would mean the interruption of the work he is doing upon Shakespeare. He proposes a general survey of "The Canon of Shakespeare"; his books on *Titus Andronicus* and Shakespeare and Chapman were instalments of it; and a third fragment is his book *The Problem of Hamlet*, published by Allen and Unwin.

He begins with a summary of the views expressed by previous scholars. The aesthetic problem has been discussed for two centuries, in England and Germany especially, "latterly with the constant preoccupation of finding a formula which shall reduce the play to aesthetic consistency." Inconsistencies have been found in Hamlet's character and actions; weaknesses in some passages which in other passages do not appear. But "every solution in turn does but ignore some of the data which motivated the other." One "subjective school" concentrating on Hamlet's character as though he were a real person all of whose words were actually spoken, call him mad, or vacillating, or the slave of sensibility, or "the victim of an excess of the reflective faculty which unfits him for action." The obvious retort is that he is reckless of his life and frequently prompt

in action. Why, then, it is answered, does he delay his mission ? He does not, is the reply ; but the counter-reply is that he is certainly felt to do so and that on the stage far too long a period seems to elapse. Another school here interposes. There was no weakness in Hamlet, but there were material difficulties in his way : the King was always surrounded by his guards and could not be got at. Of this, however, there is no evidence, and many bewildered persons have finally fallen on the comfortable bosom of the theory that Hamlet was mad and that therefore nothing he did or said is necessarily explicable or (on that assumption) in the least inexplicable. The reply to this is that Hamlet was obviously not mad, that we take a painful interest in all he thinks ; and that Shakespeare was not so mad as to write a play the central figure of which was throughout all the acts puzzling an audience by speeches and deeds which had no cohesion and leading them to take seriously ruminations which were merely ravings. At all events, save amongst those who pity him as a maniac, Hamlet has few friends. They rebuke his weakness, and “ for not killing Claudius either at the start or in the praying-scene, Hamlet has been the theme of a hundred denunciations by zealous moralists.”

Of recent years there has been a general tendency to examine the texts historically ; we have grown conscious of faults in the

Hamlet

dramatist as dramatist; faults of idleness (if the word can be used of one so productive); faults arising from lack of knowledge and time, from fatigue, from consideration of his audience, and above all—though this overlaps with the first—faults arising from the material he was using. He took his plots secondhand; the crude action and characterisation of the moulds frequently failed to suit what he poured into them. *Othello* is one instance; the *Merchant of Venice* is another; *Hamlet* is a third. There was an original barbaric story; there was a play (probably by Kyd) of which Mr. Robertson believes the German *Brudermord* to have been an adaptation. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was based on Kyd's; incidents which are excrescences on it (this is the theme Mr. Robertson develops with great acumen, though he sometimes forces the pace) derive from Kyd's play; and the contradictions are due to Shakespeare's having failed to eliminate stock elements in the story which he had inherited. I think Mr. Robertson sometimes goes too far; Shakespeare may have "taken on" the feigned madness, but I don't think he failed to make it consistent with our Hamlet. In fact, though much that Mr. Robertson says is convincing, and Shakespeare did undoubtedly fail to produce a thoroughly coherent work of art, I don't find that there is really much that clashes with his hero and his "pessimism" and introspection.

Life and Letters

Even as the play stands, and granted that Shakespeare was to some extent impeded by an inherited plot and the crude characterisation of Kyd or another, are its inconsistencies so very hard to swallow? Read the play as Shakespeare finally left it, see it acted uncut; and, whatever minor stumbling-blocks there may be in the text, whatever outcrops of a lower deposit that Shakespeare had not bothered to remove, does there not remain dominant a convincing character, a person Hamlet? Is he not as nearly complete, as positive and as nearly like a living being as any character in a fiction can be? Should we not know him if we met him, "larger than human" though he is? Do we find it so easy to define in a phrase the characters of our own friends that we should expect to "reduce him" (as the phrase has gone) to a "fixed and settled principle"? His actions may seem inconsequent and his words wild, but is there really any difficulty about what have commonly been supposed to be the larger stumbling blocks? To me the brooding Hamlet of the soliloquies is not intrinsically incompatible with the Hamlet who is a good soldier, and a master of fence, who lunges at Polonius through the arras, leaps recklessly into Ophelia's grave, sends his warders to their death, and boards the pirate ship single-handed. It is one thing to attack a pirate when you see one or to pink an eavesdropper; but even a man

Hamlet

constitutionally fearless and, when issues are clear, very prompt in action, might well shrink from murdering his uncle in cold blood. Mr. Robertson quite properly asks whether all the professors who rebuke Hamlet for vacillation in that he missed an early chance of killing his uncle would themselves without hesitation have stabbed a man in the back whilst he was saying his prayers, however incestuous a beast he may have been. Even looking at the matter from their own point of view, treating Hamlet as a real person, "not Shakespeare's creation but God's," those who have argued in so many volumes about Hamlet's weakness of will (largely on the strength of his own distraught self-questionings) show a deplorable lack of imagination. And it is lack of imagination that accounts for the endless discussions as to whether Hamlet was mad: that is to say, whether certain of the actions imputed to Shakespeare's Hamlet are inconceivable as the actions of a sane man, such as ourselves. Do they know what a highly-strung man is, or what horror is?

He shams lunacy with Polonius; he is brutal to Ophelia. Reader, have you never, when overwrought, said cruel and unjust things to somebody you loved; have you never, at moments of great suffering or mental irritation, stopped on the tip of your tongue words even brutaller and beastlier, which have surged up in a hot wave against the

Life and Letters

barrier of your normal sense? Suppose it were your mother who had married your father's murderer; suppose the revelation of the crime had come to you suddenly and you were charged (for the ghost is there and real) to avenge it. Suppose, in spite of your conviction, that you still wanted some last confirmatory evidence and that, whilst you waited, you were racked by thoughts of all the evil in the world and the impossibility of abolishing a crime by revenge, or of ever quieting your pain again. Suppose, nevertheless, that you *were* set on killing the beast and had to secure a certain opportunity. You might retain, as a rule, your self-command; be capable of attending to business when necessary, or acting on sudden emergencies; have quiet intervals. But might you not—especially as you would probably be unable to sleep (a thing of which there may be a hint in the "To be or not to be" speech)—be liable to excesses of violent temper, of distracted bitter talk? Dying, Shakespeare's Hamlet restrained Horatio from suicide with the appeal:

*O good Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind
me.*

*If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.*

Hamlet

So saying, and in his last moments making a clear political arrangement with that decision which was characteristic of him when faced by simple situations, he "crack'd his noble heart." But his appeal, though Horatio doubtless responded to it, has fallen on deaf ears elsewhere; and it is his eternal fate to be called a coward by bookworms, and a lunatic by the dull, who have never grasped the fact that others besides lunatics are "of imagination all compact." He has been as unfortunate in his death as in his life.

IV

Shakespeare's Sonnets

IT is twenty years since Messrs. Methuen, with Mr. W. J. Craig as editor, began the publication of the Arden Shakespeare; ten since Mr. R. H. Case took over general control of the series; and, I should think, at least two since a volume was issued. Mr. C. Knox Pooler's edition of the Sonnets has at last appeared. It is a good edition.

The notes are considerably more voluminous than the text. This is not always a merit in a poet's editor; and it necessitates an arrangement of the page which makes the edition an inconvenient one for ordinary reading. At the same time, a man who should habitually read the Sonnets without an occa-

Life and Letters

sional hankering for a fully annotated edition, would be more than human. Both their nature and their condition make them cry out for explanation. They appear to tell a story; but what story? They are evidently a sonnet sequence; we have the sonnets, but almost certainly not the sequence. They are dedicated by the printer to a mysterious person whose identification might or might not provide a clue which would illuminate their whole content. They are full of phrases which need explanation, and words which open the door to conjecture; the originals of the greater portion of our text are two evidently corrupt editions. One of these editions was published, apparently by a pirate, in Shakespeare's lifetime; the other by an ignoramus twenty-four years after his death. On all sides we are besieged by questions. For whom did Shakespeare write them? Are the whole of them meant to hang together? Where does euphuistic compliment end and passion begin? Who were the persons mentioned, including the brother-poet? Which of the thousands of variant readings are correct? What is the correct order? And even—though this is not commonly put—do we possess the whole of them?

Mr. Pooler is an editor of the cautious and judicious type. His notes on the text—interpretations, variants, parallel passage—embody a great deal of what is valuable in

Shakespeare's Sonnets

the work of his predecessors, and much, uniformly sensible, that is his own. On more general questions, however, he inclines to summarise the arguments of two centuries of commentators instead of parading theories of his own. One positive and exhaustive argument he does carry through, as I think, successfully. He argues, as against Sir Sidney Lee, that Benson for his edition of 1640 had no other materials than Thorpe's 1609 edition and *The Passionate Pilgrim* (1599), which contains two sonnets. *Prima facie*, there is a good deal in favour of Sir Sidney Lee's view: Benson leaves out some sonnets, misdescribes many in head-lines, muddles them up with other poems, and frequently varies the text. But most of his exploits can be explained away as the stupidities of a dolt or the deliberate changes of a knave. Premising that "one blind beast may avoid the hole into which another blind beast has fallen, but it cannot fall into the same hole unless it is going over the same ground," Mr. Pooler collects a very large number of instances to show that, where Thorpe had committed misprints or errors of punctuation which play havoc with the sense, Benson continually follows him. This is not what is called a "mere" bibliographical question. For in Benson's edition, to put it briefly, a great many of the "he's" are altered into "she's," and if it could be proved to be anything more than a mere adaptation of

Life and Letters

Thorpe's, the sex of the person addressed in most of the Sonnets would be more open to doubt than it is.

The theory that the Sonnets do not refer to actual occurrences, often propounded (and recently supported, by the way, by Mr. Asquith), does not seem to me tenable; I do not think that a poet whose own personal feelings were not directly engaged ever produced sonnets with the ring that these have. There is no justification, on the face of the poet's statements or in the general spirit which permeates the sonnets, for those interpreters who, sometimes from interested motives, have detected abnormality in Shakespeare's love for that friend of whom he said :

*And for a woman wert thou first created
Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting
And by addition me of thee defeated. . . .*

But he existed; Shakespeare urged him constantly to marry; and there was a breach. In spite of all the fever of all the controversialists, we do not know who he was. We do not even know whether his initials were W. H.; Sir Sidney Lee thinks that "W. H." was a seedy hanger-on of the publishing trade. Whether the "Dark Lady" has ever been identified with Anne Hathaway, Mr. Pooler does not say, and I do not know. But there are several candidates for her post, and at

Shakespeare's Sonnets

least six for that of the "rival poet." The amount of incidental information brought to light by all their supporters has been enormous; even Baconian research has a silver lining. But nothing near proof has ever been produced. The "Dark Lady" remains in the dark, and under "W. H.'s" dedication, as under Junius' title, the motto "*Stat nominis umbra*" must still be written.

Possibly the mystery will never be solved. But even if it were, a greater mystery remains, and one that envelopes the Plays as well as the Sonnets. It is the greatest of all Shakespearean mysteries; far greater than the mystery, so obsessing to the Baconians, of how "the drunken illiterate clown of Stratford" could have known so much law, grammar, and classical mythology. Why was the greatest of all poets so seemingly careless about the perpetuation of his texts; why did he apparently take no steps to get the bulk of his work published or even to correct the corrupt versions that did get published? Why, in an age when everybody rushed into print, did he leave his manuscripts about to die or precariously survive like foundlings? In any case, had he never said a word about his art himself, this would have been inexplicable, in the light of what we know of human nature and the nature of poets. But, apart from that, there is plenty of quite indisputable detailed evidence that he who envied

Life and Letters

“ this man’s art and that man’s scope,” and who spoke of the “ proud full sail ” of a rival’s “ great verse ” revered his own calling. More, over and over again, in the Sonnets themselves he not only shows that consciousness of his own powers which great poets always have, but definitely anticipates the durability of what he has written. He never says that he is writing for his private amusement or relief and that he does not care what becomes of his work or whether anyone ever reads it : though that is the attitude that some critics, anxious not to admit any puzzle insoluble, have absurdly imputed to him. What he says is :

*Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme ;
But you shall shine more bright in these contents
Than unswept stone, besmear’d with sluttish time:
When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his word not War’s quick fire shall
burn
The living record of your memory.
'Gainst death and all oblivious enmity
Shall you pace forth ; your praise shall still find
room,
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.
So, till the judgment that yourself arise,
You live in this, and dwell in lovers’ eyes.*

Shakespeare's Sonnets

“Who will believe my verse in time to come?” he asks again. “Do thy most, old Time,” he says. “My love shall in my verse ever live long.” “To times in hope my verse shall stand, Praising thy worth”:

*Your monument shall be my gentle verse,
Which eyes not yet created shall o'er read;
And tongues to be your being shall rehearse,
When all the breathers of this world are dead;
You still shall live, such virtue hath my pen,
Where breath most breathes, even in the mouths
of men.*

And where he is not promising, but hoping, we see the confidence behind the hope, as in that sonnet with the marvellous beginning:

*Since brass nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o'ersways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?*

He had written in some of these sonnets the greatest lyric verse in the world, and he knew it; verse which in its effortless fertility of image, its “inevitable” directness of phrase, its perfection of rhythm, must be the idol and the despair of every writer who reads it and sees Shakespeare doing a thousand times “on his head” what he himself would be proud to do once. There are contorted sonnets;

Life and Letters

there are even dull ones ; but the best, and the best parts of the others surpass anything in English poetry. And they were, apparently, the by-product of a voluminous professional dramatist.

THE GREAT UNFINISHED

IT is announced that the late William de Morgan, who became a good, a successful and a voluminous novelist at an age when most men are content to narrate their reminiscences from a chair, left two unfinished novels behind him. One lacked only the last chapter; the other much more. His notes for the missing parts were in existence, and with the aid of these his widow (who had just finished the work when she died) completed the books.

De Morgan's admirers will await the results with curiosity. Cases are not uncommon in which husband and wife acquire similar habits of style and even similar physiognomies; and every congenial couple with alert minds develop in time a communal sense of humour. Each party sees humour in the same situations and responds to them in the same phrases; after many years, in fact, words cease to be necessary, and the simultaneous joke is flashed from eye to eye. But De Morgan's characterisation was so odd and his method of writing so extremely personal that I cannot conceive that there will not, however faithfully his

ideas are followed up, be very marked joins where his script ends and Mrs. de Morgan's begins. But I do not seriously expect, unless the novels were early ones, that we shall feel much regret that they were never finished by their author. The age at which he started writing was an advantage to him one way: his first books had the benefit of a long and diverse experience; accumulated observations poured opulently forth. But everything went into them; he was looking backward and not forward; and his later books contained nothing worth having that was not in *Somehow Good* and *Joseph Vance*, and were far below them in quality.

There is nothing unusual about unfinished books. Our literature is strewn with them, from Chaucer's translation of the *Romance of the Rose* to Henry James's two delicious and tantalising fragments. Many of the greatest works in literature were never finished. We have only a half of the *Faerie Queene* that Spenser planned. Virgil—which is not surprising since he thought he had done a good day's work if he had written twelve lines—did not complete the *Aeneid*. Byron's *Don Juan* leaves off at a situation as teasing to the reader as it was certainly awkward for the characters; and his *Childe Harold* was never completed by him, though there exists a French continuation by the versatile Lamartine. Keats's *Hyperion*, his greatest poem, is no

The Great Unfinished

more than the torso of a Titan, and we lost something very great in the missing part of Shelley's *Triumph of Life*. Wordsworth's *Excursion* is incomplete; of Macaulay's *History* we have but the introduction and the first full-length section, and we may never get such a history of Anne's reign as the most vivid of social historians would have written. Dostoieffsky's *Brothers Karamazoff*, long as it is, was not finished; that few people know this is probably accounted for by the fact that few people have got through it. Jane Austen left two unfinished novels; and the list might be extended. But it is not very often that anyone has the courage to complete the unfinished work of a good writer. It is done occasionally. I myself, most inexperienced and reluctant of novelists, have lately received the sacred charge of finishing a work of fiction should its author (who, I am sure, will survive me by many years) die before he has come to the end of it.

Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, perhaps the loveliest poem in couplets in the language, was continued by Chapman, with results that did not justify the enterprise. Peter Motteux tried and failed to keep up to that unparalleled level of creative translation that Sir Thomas Urquhart had reached in the early books of Rabelais. A play of Meredith's was licked into final shape by (I hope my memory is not at fault) Sir James Barrie, and

“Q,” who was unfortunate in having one of Stevenson’s duller books to cope with, finished *St. Ives*. Nobody, I think, has dared attempt an end to *Weir of Hermiston*, an enterprise only less formidable than would be that of rounding off a novel by Miss Austen. I am not sorry that these works are left as they were. But I do wish that somebody, anybody, Mrs. Dickens, Miss Dickens, Master Dickens, or Wilkie Collins, had finished *Edwin Drood*, for then we should have been spared this eternal controversy.

It breaks out yearly like prairie fires; you may not notice where it starts, but at more or less regular intervals you are suddenly aware that the air is filled with smoke and flames. They are at it now, for the ninety-ninth time, in the *Times Literary Supplement*; next time it may be in the *Saturday Review*, or the *Athenaeum*, or the *Daily Mail*, or all of them at once. There seem to be tens of thousands of persons in this country who worry over the Drood problem as chess enthusiasts do over mates in five moves. And the extraordinary thing is that they have a way of talking about the mystery of Drood and his latter end as though they were talking about something that really happened.

Now I do not see why men should not amuse themselves by trying to elucidate a real mystery. Researches and disputations may then end in discovery. It is a comprehensible

The Great Unfinished

pastime to attempt to identify the Man in the Iron Mask or to try to demonstrate that Sir Philip Francis did or did not write the *Letters of Junius*. Somebody wrote the letters of Junius: they exist; new evidence or fresh examination of old evidence may (though I don't think it will) conclusively prove who was the author of those topical polemics, the literary merits of which we are all agreed in so grossly exaggerating. There are still people who think there was something more than William Sharp behind Fiona Macleod. There are still those who think that Dr. Johnson, when he said that he "would not be deterred from detecting a cheat by the menaces of a ruffian," did not say the last word on the Gaelic origins of Macpherson's *Ossian*. They are welcome to their opinions, and they are entitled to wish for something concrete to support them. But it is a totally different thing to dispute about who did what and what happened to whom in an uncompleted story which is not a history but a fiction. The common-sense position is that nothing whatever happened to Edwin Drood, that he himself and all his confrères were the acme of inactivity; for the simple reason that there were (in the highly appropriate words of their own fabulist) no such persons.

It is of course a great tribute to Dickens's hypnotic power over the simple-minded that we should have been able to persuade people

that his characters were actual men and women of whom he merely chronicled some of the words and deeds. And it is an immense compliment to his literary craftsmanship that even men who do not forget that Drood and Company were fictitious, assume that his art was so perfect and the relation between cause and effect in his works so precise that, given a set of characters and a set of circumstances provided by him, one should be able infallibly to deduce what remains undisclosed from what the novelist, who is as true to nature as Nature herself, has revealed. But I don't think that even Dickens's literary craftsmanship can deserve so high a compliment as all that. Nor does Dickens's literary conscience. Even if words of his were produced giving such and such an explanation of the problem and the mystery, and such and such a sketch of the end of the book, I should not take those words as gospel. For he was not so perfect a craftsman (who is?) as to leave himself no two ways out of a situation, and his conscience was not so relentless as to prevent him from producing the most unlikely effects from his causes, if whim or expediency made him feel inclined so to do. He was demonstrably not above faking a most improbable last act to a novel in order to gratify the sentiment of the public. And I refuse to believe that he, who could make almost any character do almost anything, disguise almost any man as some

The Great Unfinished

other man, resurrect the dead and transform the living, would not have found some way out of his situation which no man will discover by sitting down and examining a fragment. The problem of a novelist's plot is not like a chess problem. There is no mathematical limit to the novelist's solution, and the novelist has no rules to obey; at least if there are rules he very seldom obeys them.

WALT WHITMAN

A JAPANESE, who happened to be visiting England this month (July, 1919), might well think that one of the most established, popular, and closely read of modern authors was Walt Whitman. He would be wrong. The fact that Whitman's centenary has just occurred has led all the critics to write articles about him; but I suspect that it is years since most of them even mentioned his name. He is there all right—on his shelf, classified and ticketed, in case he should be wanted—recognised as one of the most interesting figures in American history; but I doubt if he is currently read anything like as much as he was ten or fifteen years ago. Most educated men, no doubt, have dipped into him. A good many writers are patently under his influence. But he is not read as Keats, Shelley, or Tennyson are read, and his influence is not exercised over our best younger writers, and is, moreover, as often as not, indirect, operating through his French disciples upon persons who probably sneer at him. If this diagnosis be correct, it will be easy to find a reason; and the reason is that

180

Walt Whitman

he was most of the time a bad artist, and deliberately a bad artist.

He said a good many things about his own writings. He also said, "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then, I contradict myself." I do not think, however, that this could pertinently be quoted against one who should see a quite fundamental contradiction between those passages in which he spoke for all the world as if he were the prophet neither of America nor of democracy, nor of anything else, and those other passages in which he bade a world in need of regeneration to listen to his "barbaric yawp." "No labour machine," he writes,

*Nor discovery have I made,
Nor will I be able to leave behind me any wealthy
bequest to found a hospital or library,
Nor reminiscence of any deed of courage for
America,
Nor literary success nor intellect, nor book for
the book-shelf,
But a few carols vibrating through the air I
leave,
For comrades and lovers.*

One might think he was Burns or Herrick! Here as elsewhere he seems to forget what these "few carols" were like. Usually it was impossible to forget it. And he was never more truthful than when he said, "The

Life and Letters

words of my book nothing, the drift of it everything."

Unfortunately, comrades and lovers, poets and lovers of poetry, do not as a rule find lasting nourishment in "carols" of which the doctrine is everything and the words nothing. Art exists; and if Whitman's statement were literally and always accurate, nobody would read him at all, for his sentences would not convey his meaning. It is still true that his "drift" is, in the mass of his work, the most, the only important thing about him; and "drift" has a habit of getting out of date. When one says that he lost by throwing over the whole apparatus of what he regarded as feudal, monarchical, European poetry, people sometimes suppose that one is complaining that he did not write in rhyme. That is absurd; nor as a rule did Milton. And Whitman's occasional rhymes—as in *O Captain, My Captain*, *Ethiopia Saluting the Colours*, and *The Singer in the Prison*—are not so elegant as to make anybody wish he had attempted more of them. It is not that. It is that, though he had a natural gift for beautiful rhythm, he customarily wrote a sort of spasmodic prose, and, above all that, attempted to do in poetry what, at any rate in his manner, could not be done. He had a gospel—vague, but vaguely fine—of democracy and of Americanism. He tried in the light of this to survey all life and all effort, and in considerable detail.

Walt Whitman

“I will report,” he said, “all heroism from an American point of view.” He tried, in a brief pemmicanising way, which usually excluded the wealth of detail which might have made such reports interesting, to report also all history, all industrial and commercial operations, all navigation and science, all physical experiences, and even all geography; and by adding up innumerable small statements of them and wrapping them in a framework of democratic rhetoric. There are poems of his which read like extracts from a gazetteer interspersed with the highest flights of Mr. Lloyd George’s oratory. There are great formless masses and little formless fragments, formless in general outline as they are in detail—mere exhortations and statements, having no artistic (I fall into his phraseology!) rapport. Possibly a diet of *Leaves of Grass* is neither sustaining nor digestible; but it is certainly not eatable.

Few, I think, except critics in search of themes and desperate men in search of a creed, will in the future read and re-read the enormous mass of Walt’s carols. But it will be, in a manner, kept afloat. Firstly, because of his personality. It is quite true that “This is no book. Who touches this touches a man.” There were affectations about him. A great deal of the time one feels that his sounding rhetoric is something hollow: that he is “yawping” as loud as he can to keep up his

convictions, if not his courage. And his cultivated mannerisms are, after the first attraction of their quaintness has passed, repulsive. "Camerado," "Libertad," "Omnes, omnes," and the rest of the jargon; how does it square with his assertion, for he meant to assert this, that he chose the first spontaneous words he found? He may have shaken the dust of the Old World from his feet (which had never trodden it), but this did not stop him from calling a pavement, in an English poem, a "trottoir," nor did it prevent him from spelling "cosmos" with a "k," presumably because he had heard that the Greeks did so; he even went to the length of spelling Canada with a "K," which the Greeks might have done had they had a chance, but which would scarcely be deemed a natural thing, even by a Speling Reformer. "Me imperturbe, standing at ease in Nature"; "Melange mine own, the unseen and the seen"; a man who was only unself-consciously trying to convert people would not concoct preposterous openings like those; and such sentences ("No dainty dolce affetuoso I," says he!) are sprinkled all over his works. Yet, at bottom, he was genuine and original; he said things that needed courage to say and things which it gives courage to read. He will never again come with the freshness of appeal that he had forty or fifty years ago. Men then, shadowed by "the Victorian compromise,"

Walt Whitman

hungering for something audacious and brutal, were intensely thrilled by this voice, which came over the ocean crying, "I loaf and invite my soul," "I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and so luscious," proclaiming the most intimate of his physical sensations and unveiling the most shameful of his hypocrisies. We have got used to self-exposure and philosophic egoism since then; Whitman's uniqueness is less extensive and remarkable than it was. But he remains a man peculiar and great, and, in spite of all his efforts, a poet. The gold is scattered all over that great heap of quartz, and a few poems or sections of poems are gold all through. There are *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, *The Two Veterans*, *When Lilacs First in the Dooryard Bloomed*, *Beat, Beat Drums*; a few more. Any stanza of the Dirge might be quoted:

"Lo the moon ascending, up from the east the silvery round moon beautiful over the house-tops, ghastly, phantom moon, immense and silent moon.

"I see a sad procession, and I hear the sound of coming full-key'd bugles, all the channels of the city streets they're flooding, as with voices and with tears.

"I hear the great drums pounding, and the small drums steady whirring, and every blow of the great convulsive drums strikes me through and through."

Life and Letters

But two things must be remarked. One is that when men quote Whitman or anthologise extracts from him, it is from the same few poems over and over again that they quote. And the other is that these are all poems in which Whitman fell (even when the verse is "free") into poetic rhythms and sometimes even into traditional stanza forms. And they are poems in which he did what all must do who successfully "carol" for comrades, lovers, or anybody else; poems in which he wrote from the heart, localised the objects he was describing, and saw them clearly, communicated emotion instead of throwing a Dictionary and ten thousand Commandments at the intellect, and achieved the highest effects of art by the right use of "words," and the total neglect of what he normally regarded as his "drift."

ROHMER

A YEAR or two ago I drew, or attempted to draw, attention to the peculiar qualities of Mr. Sax Rohmer. Only in a casual and parenthetical way, however, for I was ostensibly writing about something else. A holiday, during which my brain has required and received rest, has brought me back to him. I unfortunately left at home half-read—if this personal interpolation may be pardoned—his latest work. I saw enough of it to be relieved of my fear, engendered by the last I had read (*The Orchard of Tears*), that Mr. Rohmer was going to desert his natural province and attempt to emulate Miss Corelli, an operation for which he is not designed. But the advantage of liking a really popular author like Mr. Rohmer is that one can find his books, in cheap editions, on even the most Philistine of railway bookstalls, where Chesterton, Richard Jefferies, and even Dickens are names at which the clerk gapes in bewilderment or boredom. I had therefore no difficulty, at various stopping-places, in furnishing myself with the old familiar friends, *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-manchu*, *The Yellow Claw*, *Tales of*

Life and Letters

Secret Egypt, The Devil Doctor, and the Si-Fan Mysteries. This last I am now reading. How, I wonder again, can any man with a taste for the nightmarish and the phantasmagorial, and the desire of an occasional escape from the necessity of exerting his own intellect, deny that Mr. Rohmer is as competent a merchant of shocks as exist ?

The *Si-Fan Mysteries* is good all through. It even does what all good shockers do when their villains are too good to waste, disposes of its villain in such a manner that, although presumably dead, he may well turn up again—like Sherlock Holmes. It begins in a London hotel, where a diplomat, worn to a shadow by a horrible secret, lies dying. It ends in a cave of the sea with pursuers hot on the heels of pursued, the plot frustrated, the last diabolical weapon foiled. Between this beginning and this end we have met the Man with the Limp and the deadly Flower of Silence. We have spent agitated hours in the Chinatown joy-shop, watched burglaries and poisonings, chased cabs, and heard strange knockings. We have learned the secret of the Golden Pomegranates and waited while Sir Baldwin Frazer operated, under compulsion, on Fu-Manchu's brain. We have rushed from the empty little house by the Baldwin, to the house at Wandsworth, the *café* in Soho, the Room with a Golden Door, and the dungeons of Greywater Park. No ingenuity, no method of transport, and no

Rohmer

adjective has been spared. And if we notice, we notice with gratitude and a compliment, that almost the whole of the book's long action has been conducted at night, or, failing night, in thick fog.

There are, to put it politely, distinct flaws in Mr. Rohmer's style. His sentences are often so spasmodic, his words so repetitive, that one sometimes suspects him of dictation. In several of his books, including *The Si-Fan Mysteries*, there is a character named Nayland-Smith. His status is odd: he appears to be a Burmese civil servant who gets, whenever Mr. Rohmer wants him, indefinite leave from some undefined authority in order to tackle problems that are a little abstruse for Scotland Yard. He is tall, lean, long of jaw; he has a habit, on almost every page, of either "loading" his pipe or letting fall the match with which he is about to light it. A careful artist would not repeat these things so often as Mr. Rohmer does; even the most patient reader is apt sometimes to wish that, for once, Nayland-Smith would break the monotony by employing, on the one hand, a cigar or a cigarette, or, on the other, a patent lighter. Nayland-Smith's mode of expressing himself is as little varied as his "business with hands and pipe." I extract a few specimens from pp. 122-123 of *The Si-Fan Mysteries*:

"Take my hand," he snapped energetically.

Life and Letters

“Sit tight and catch,” rapped Smith.

“Come on, Weymouth!” rapped Nayland-Smith.

“You don’t have to,” snapped Smith.

Very seldom indeed does Nayland-Smith say, cry, continue, resume, observe, rejoin, remark, reply, or interject. I find him occasionally muttering or jerking, but the immense majority of his sentences are either rapped or snapped. This, quite apart from the fact that it might well have put his companions off their game, becomes so irritating that the reader would welcome anything, anything, for a change—even the “he husked” and “he hoarsed” of Mr. Leacock’s celebrated burlesque.

Here are some of Mr. Rohmer’s defects; I suppose I had better add, though I personally am corrupt enough to delight in them, the truly terrible words that he invents. In one of his books, all the well-known shuddery words having been worn to rags, he finds it necessary, in order to get one more thrill out of the exhausted nerves, to begin describing things as “beetlesque.” His shadows are “cloisteresque,” his music is “luresome,” and the trackers on the roof of the Café de l’Egypte look down on “the teemful streets of Soho.” But what of that? Words are Mr. Rohmer’s slaves, not his masters. He uses them as a great painter uses his colours; he is bound by no conventions, but thinks only

Rohmer

of the effects at which he is aiming. And he achieves them. There are many writers of cheap shockers as reckless of English, as untrammelled by considerations of "verisimilitude," as resolved to get six thrills to the page, as debonair in the constant use of old materials which themselves or others have found satisfactory, as Mr. Rohmer. We know elsewhere—oh! how plentifully elsewhere—these mysterious Chinese, these Oriental brass boxes, these opium dens—hells, I should say—these wharves by the foggy Thames, these police boats and floating corpses, these palatial hotels (I should say khans or caravanserais) with their suave managers, these underground tunnels, these furtive servants, these rope-ladders and blow-pipes, these rooms in the Temple, these boomings of Big Ben at midnight. We know, how well, that distraught girl in the rain with the black scarf over her head and that other hussy, dark-eyed, with the voluptuous lips and the snake bangle, who is "probably a Eurasian." But when we meet them in Mr. Rohmer they have an extra touch of vividness that they lack elsewhere. It is he, and not his rivals, who has left permanently impressed on my imagination the picture of a man shamming sleep in an opium den whilst the local siren, with death in her hands, lifts his eyelids to test him; the picture of a bony yellow arm thrust into the moonlight in a high room. And, to do him justice, he has not left the

Life and Letters

shocker-maker's cabinet of properties where he found it. The Chinese scientific genius who kidnaps illustrious English doctors, hypnotises them and makes them work for the dominance of the Yellow Race is, I think, a novel conception. The wholesale importation of Oriental spiders, scorpions, and snakes into an English baronet's premises has not, I believe, been done before. And some of Dr. Fu-Manchu's scientific inventions are indisputably new, notably that memorable cross between a fungus and a microbe, used in that case where the fungus fell like dust on the explorers and instantaneously began to spread cankerously over all their flesh. I could give others, only one should not queer the pitch. But I have said enough, I hope, to indicate that Mr. Rohmer—though his morals are uniformly as sound as those of all melodramatists—has as vivid and unwholesome an imagination, as fecund a spring of morbid invention, as any writer in the cheap series or out of them. Of course, if one examines his plots and his machinery with the cold eye of a scientific investigator one will very probably arrive at the conclusion that all would not have happened just as he says it does, that his characters would not in all cases have behaved as he makes them, and, particularly, that the idiocies committed in these, as in all mystery books, by the paladins fighting on the side of the angels, in order to give the villains a good

Rohmer

run, might in most cases have been avoided. But readers who examine the art of the fabulist in this manner should avoid Mr. Rohmer. He is not for the pedant. He is for those who can fall under his spell sufficiently to believe whatever he says. Of that company I am one.

The book is open before me. The last sentences on the page catch my eye. The trapdoor is softly closed. The men stand over the panes of the skylight :

“ Look,” he said, “ there is the house of hashish ”—

I shall stop writing this, and go on from there.

POPE

IN a Leslie Stephen lecture published by the Cambridge University Press, Mr. J. W. Mackail attempts and gives a fresh survey of the problem of Pope. It was time someone did. The reaction still lasts, and there is still current the view of Pope as a poet of the reign of Queen Anne whose demise was almost as final as his sovereign's, a spiteful little man of some wit, who wrote interminable, maddeningly monotonous couplets, which, when they were not about Grub Street, were concerned with nymphs, swains, groves, the finny tribe, and the conscious main. A widespread view; not, of course, the view of any man at all familiar with Pope. But even those who have read him do not commonly do justice to his native powers or recognise the elements in him of a quite other kind of poet—a poet of large imagination, alive to natural beauty and the mystery of life.

Mr. Mackail's lecture would be serviceable did it do no more than call attention to Pope's earlier works, and to the fact that it was by those that his best contemporaries thought that he would live. Those later works with

Pope

which Pope's name is now chiefly associated contain stray passages noble in conception, in diction, in march; the end of the *Dunciad* testifies to the eye that saw and the hand that executed, years earlier, that vision of the happy solitary who

*Bids his free soul expatiate in the skies,
Amid her kindred stars familiar roam,
Survey the region, and confess her home.*

Frequently in the *Homer*, and sometimes later, we have instances of his accurate observation and most felicitous translation of natural objects; the couplet

*Lo where Maeotis sleeps, and hardly flows
The freezing Tanais through a waste of snows*

was Pope's own favourite, which shows that his judgment remained sound to the last. But in those early works, which are now so often ignored, but on which, we should not forget, his contemporary fame was chiefly based, beauty is frequent, and "the singing voice."

Mr. Mackail quotes "Wher'er you walk," a quatrain unsurpassable for delicate grace. But he might have taken his quotations from almost anywhere in *Windsor Forest*, the *Pastorals*, or *The Rape of the Lock*. His quatrain can almost be equalled from the third *Pastoral*:

Life and Letters

*Oft on the rind I carved her amorous vows,
While she with garlands hung the bending
boughs :*

*The garlands fade, the vows are worn away,
So dies her love, and so my hopes decay,*

and both *Windsor Forest* and the *Pastorals* are full of examples of his feeling for a certain kind of landscape and his art in conveying it. All the *Forest* passages about hunting, fishing, trees and birds might be quoted. This is characteristic in subject, though the double "while" is weak and those oxen are lifted from *Comus* :

*Here where the mountains, lessening as they rise,
Lose the low vales, and steal into the skies :
While labouring oxen, spent with toil and heat,
In their loose traces from the field retreat,
While circling smokes from village-tops are seen
And the fleet shades glide o'er the dusky green.*

Mr. Mackail suggests that he has been disliked for using the diction of his own age, and not that of another age. There is something in this, but it is also true, not only that he did the best things best, but that when he is at his finest his diction is least peculiarly of his own time.

Pope began with a great, not the greatest, equipment. In spite of his occasional grandeurs it is likely that had he matured as he began he would have become at all events one of

Pope

the greatest of pastoral poets, a poet covering in his landscape the range from Claude to Watteau, seldom far from Dresden in his figures, and making music akin to that of the French and Venetian composers of his century. But he did not mature. It was not, as has been supposed, that he either was or became entirely a man with tastes and no feelings, artificial and urban. He did not lose the sense which made him write of a character :

*Tired of the scene parterres and fountains yield,
He finds at last he better likes a field.*

But his interests did shift, and his sensibilities did become atrophied ; he turned his back on beauty ; his music became rarer. Concurrently his versification hardened. The drying up of the singing impulse left his verse rigid ; all his art and critical sense could not supply that flow and sway into which emotion would have carried his verse automatically. His passion had never been strong ; the couplet, with him, would always have been a dangerous instrument ; but when his subjects ceased to move him there was nothing to prevent his fondness for neatness getting the better of him. A man can never be too careful about accuracy of phrasing ; and all good poets correct. But correction became a mania with Pope, and it was correction misplaced. He trimmed until almost every couplet looked like almost every other couplet. He spoke of

Life and Letters

*that unwearied mill
That burn'd ten thousand verses*

with more truth than he knew. It was then that he was making poetry that "mere mechanic art" against which Cowper and Keats revolted. The couplet got hold of him, the Muse let him go, and he developed vices which a thousand slavish imitators copied.

The Muse let him go. Mr. Mackail gives several reasons why Pope did not become a very great poet. He refers to the unlyrical quality of his age, the cramping effect of "his method of distillation and concentration," and his "low vitality"; but he gets nearest to the fundamental thing when he speaks of his "artificially limited scope of interest," matter reacting on style. Temperament was at the bottom of his failure to fulfil his promise. He brought himself into a state of mind unfavourable to the highest kind of production. There is a phrase in one of the epistles :

*at night
Fools rush into my head and so I write.*

The consummate cleverness of his satire could never be disputed. It may be argued that he sometimes polished and heightened his invective too much. But as a rule he seizes weaknesses with an infallible malice, and crystallises them into perfect phraseology.

Pope

Everybody knows the marvellous passage about Addison, the "damn with faint praise" passage; probably no poet in any language has strung together so compact, so pregnant, so witty a series of epigrams. All his satirical works are thick strewn with examples of that power of saying an acid thing with the utmost possible compression. They are plentiful in the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*, an example being his tribute to small critics who write about great authors :

*Even such small critics some regard may claim,
Preserved in Milton's or in Shakespeare's name.
Pretty! in amber to observe the forms
Of hairs, or straws, or dirt, or grubs, or worms!
The things, we know, are neither rich nor rare,
But wonder how the devil they got there.*

What ease there is in such couplets from the *Dunciad* as :

*While pensive poets painful vigils keep,
Sleepless themselves, to give their readers sleep,*

and the demolishing lines on Settle, the City poet, who celebrates a civic pageant :

*Now night descending, the proud scene was o'er,
But lived, in Settle's numbers, one day more.*

But marvellous though his satire was, it was

the symptom of a disease. "Fools rush into my head." That became his condition. He turned away from the great themes, he lost the habit, if never entirely the capacity, of contemplating and responding to the sublime and the lovely in nature and the heart of man. Lacking that "fierce indignation" which Swift professed and often felt, he spent his days and nights thinking splenetically of people who had offended him and people whose only offence was that they had no brains. He came to wear a permanent sneer; he developed a preference for saying a biting rather than a beautiful thing; he chose to be satirical, and he became, though to the last he was liable to make an exquisite phrase or to glide briefly into sublimity, a satirist pure and simple. If a man constantly practises satire, that is bound to be his fate; he may have many moods, but if the satirical mood becomes a habit of mind he is, as a poet, done for, for poetry is the fruit of love, sympathy, humility, and awe, which are no qualities for a witty scourger of fools.

GOD SAVE THE KING

THE controversy about the National Anthem has broken out once more. Everybody admits that the words of the existing anthem—its German tune has a certain massive dignity when sung by a large crowd—are weak. Even in the first verse:

*Send him victorious,
Happy and glorious
Long to reign over us*

would appear extremely crude to us were it not hallowed by long usage. Mrs. Browning herself never perpetrated a worse rhyme. And as for the rest, where it is not clumsy it is, to modern sensibilities, offensive. People point out that when we are at peace with the world it is wantonly brutal for us to sing—in the most solemn and feeling way, too—those lines which are the most direct and vigorous of the lot:

*Confound their politics,
Frustrate their knavish tricks,*

whilst, session by session, the King announces

Life and Letters

from the throne "my relations with foreign Powers continue to be friendly." The thing should be rewritten, we are told; we should have a more competently written poem as our Anthem, and one that should embody, not the passions of 1719, but the loftiest aspirations of 1919. From time to time, therefore, new versions appear. The latest was sung the other day "under official auspices." The author of the new verses kept his name dark, and when he heard what people said about them he must have congratulated himself upon his reticence.

Certainly his effort was very feeble. But I do not think those newspaper critics who demand that the Poet Laureate, or Mr. Kipling, or Mr. Smith should produce us a fine new anthem quite understand the difficulty of the task. We may waive the general difficulty of doing things to order, and admit that a great many people have written, deliberately and in response to a demand, ceremonial verses perfectly adapted to their purpose. But any National Anthem must be a peculiar thing, and our own presents special difficulties, which we will come to later.

The first thing to be observed is that your words must be singable, and the second is that they must be capable of being understood by, and sympathetically sung by, the whole population. The author is not to express his purely personal sentiments, nor the feelings or

God Save the King

conceptions of any particular class, defined by locality, political views, or education. He may (to take extreme illustrations) wish that God should convert the King to Judaism, or that the King should make war upon the Japanese ; but these are not amongst the common and abiding desires of the generality of Englishmen. He may, when he looks for what is central in the England that he loves, think of Chaucer and Shakespeare, of Milton's *Areopagitica*, of Magdalen Tower, the oaks of Sussex, or village churches at evening with rooks flying about their elms. But he cannot mention them ; the personal, or sectional, quality in imagination or taste must be avoided ; and, by the same token, all words not in common use, all images that to a labourer would seem recondite, and even all metrical devices that would puzzle the simple. He is to find the Greatest Common Measure of the poetical ; and, by the time he has found it along his line of search there will probably be very little poetry left. The sentiments of a National Anthem must be sentiments understood and shared by at least a majority of the English-speaking inhabitants of the empire ; they must be above dispute, except by cranks, they must be as comprehensive as possible, and they must focus as great a portion as possible of the emotions and thoughts that all patriotic men have about the empire, its merits, and its functions in the world.

Life and Letters

So there is no chance for the specific or the picturesque. Many men have failed with the National Anthem by trying to give it a beauty of detail which it literally is not capable of bearing. Possibly the most skilfully written of all new versions was that of the late James Elroy Flecker. His second verse ran :

*Thou in his suppliant hands
Hast placed such Mighty Lands :
Save thou our King !
As once from golden Skies
Rebels with flaming eyes,
So the King's Enemies
Doom thou and fling.*

And in the later verses he cast his thought on the

*Few dear miles
Of sweetly-meadowed Isles,*

celebrating the loveliness of each kingdom. That his version is, as a poem to be read or spoken, immeasurably superior to the old version a child could see. Yet the better it is the worse it is. Those subtle effects, those chosen epithets, those efforts of the imagination, are, in a popular anthem for singing, all wrong. They would hold the singer up; his attention would be detained by single words; and, beyond all this, he would certainly be too sheepish and self-conscious to sing such

God Save the King

words. A large congregation could only sing this version when men had got so acclimatised to it that they never thought of its meaning. In the ideal anthem, to be sung naturally by all men, the poet must put commonplaces in a manner which will be simple and clear without being too banal.

Here is a task difficult enough, whatever the metre and whatever the time. But he who would compose new verses to *God Save the King* has a heavier handicap still. His words must not merely be singable, but they must be singable to that loud tune, with its series of hard thumps with a trip at the end of each. And they must be written in a very constricting metre. The end of the line is problem enough. It almost compels the use of misplaced stresses. But the beginning is a fetter. Each line must start with an emphatic word. It would be preposterous to come down with such a whack upon "And," or indeed any conjunctive or unimportant syllable; and the result of this is that each line must almost necessarily be a complete phrase without run over.

The difficulties and the perils being such, failure being so easy and success so unlikely, the wonder is that anybody but an innocent or a vainglorious simpleton should be courageous enough to try his hand at the reformation of our Anthem. But such is the attraction of the difficult, such the force of patriotism, and

so powerful the dislike of the existing Anthem, that even the most sensitive and fastidious artists are tempted by the problem. I recently spent some days with two who had settled down to it with the determination not to stop until they had produced something satisfactory. Either of them could write finely of patriotism; both, in fact, have done so; but not all their love of England and enlightened ideals seemed to be availing them here, and their delicate ears seemed to be rather an impediment than otherwise with that ruthless tune dragging their syllables after it. If they produce good and interesting poems, as they will end by doing, their next step will be to knock out all the original lines and substitute trite ones, to replace most of their concrete words by abstract ones (thus reversing the usual rule), and to substitute for all epithets which have flavour adjectives looking quite ordinary. When, finally, they have achieved anthems which are acceptable as to sentiments, mention all the agreed and large things, omit all else, and can be spoken with as little attention to the particular words as one gives when one says "Pass the butter," they will probably find it difficult to distinguish the results of their labours from the dull effusions of the many poetasters who have essayed the same task. They will look a little atrabiliously at those strings of vapid observations about the wide Empire (or "Empire wide"—to scan), Truth,

God Save the King

Justice, Liberty, Freedom, Union, Love, and Peace, punctuated by those periodic God Saves, they will ask themselves whether it was for this that Heaven gave them brains and the gift of Poetry, and they will ultimately—though people *do* stumble on miracles—think it best to destroy, or at least to conceal, the proofs of their failure to perform the impossible and their lamentable success in producing the bad.

MIDSHIPMAN EASY

IT was hot weather. I had intended to read a book about education. But the sun withered up my inclination, and casting about for something which I should certainly be able to enjoy, and which would not demand from me an intellectual effort to which I felt unequal, I borrowed a copy of *Midshipman Easy*, which I had read many times, but not for years past. I found it better than ever, and could not help wondering how it is that Marryat is so often treated as no more than a slightly superior Henty, who concocted "adventure stories" for boys and was an effective recruiting agent for the Royal Navy.

If there is in the English language a book of the adventurous kind more full of exciting fights and escapes, freer from dull pages, more diversified, more amusing, and, I may add, better written, I do not know it. It may certainly be argued that the adventures are very crowded, that luck unduly favours the hero, and that the good characters are exceptionally good; but it is as realistic as a book of the sort could be, and if nothing is to happen in novels that could not happen in normal life,

Midshipman Easy

we should have a tedious time of it. The characters are slight, and some of them are caricatures; but that is bound to be so if incident is what a writer is mainly concerned with, and Marryat seems to me to give as good pictures of his people as is comformable with the nature, pace, and rapid change of his story. As an inventor of good incident not even the Stevenson of *Treasure Island*, not even, I think, Dumas, could beat him at his best. And in *Midshipman Easy* he was at his best all the time.

Think of the succession of episodes we have been through before we have come to the end; Jack's early escapades, his encounter with Mr. Bonnycastle, his first burst at the *Blue Posts*, his battles with Vigors, his three-cornered duel with the bo'sun and the swell mobsman, some of the finest little sea-fights in literature; the "Duty before Decency" incident, the cruise with the mutineers who were cowed by ground-sharks, the rescue of the three ladies and the hoisting of the green petticoat (the emblem of equality), the fight with the padrone and his men in the speronare, the heroic siege in Sicily when the galley slaves battered their way from floor to floor—there are all these and a hundred minor excitements which were all a part of the day's work; and thrown in are the history of Mesty—Mephistopheles Faust, the Ashantee chief—and the blood-curdling story of Don Rebeira. Hundreds of characters

Life and Letters

of several nations have crossed the scene, and glimpses have been given of half the Mediterranean, and the whole performance has been accomplished unerringly. No discursion or discussion is ever kept up a minute too long to keep the reader's attention, and the actual writing is so good that it is difficult to understand that it does not receive more notice.

I will quote the very first paragraph of the book :

“ Mr. Nicodemus Easy was a gentleman who lived down in Hampshire ; he was a married man and in very easy circumstances. Most couples find it very easy to have a family, but not always quite so easy to maintain them. Mr. Easy was not at all uneasy on the latter score, as he had no children ; but he was anxious to have them, as most people covet what they cannot obtain. After ten years, Mr. Easy gave it up as a bad job. Philosophy is said to console a man under disappointment, although Shakespeare asserts that it is no remedy for toothache ; so Mr. Easy turned philosopher, the very best profession a man can take up, when he is fit for nothing else ; he must be a very incapable person indeed who cannot talk nonsense. For some time Mr. Easy could not decide upon what description his nonsense should consist of ; at last he fixed upon the rights of man, equality, and all

Midshipman Easy

that; how every person was born to inherit his share of the earth, a right at present only admitted to a certain length; that is, about six feet, for we all inherit our graves, and are allowed to take possession without dispute. But no one would listen to Mr. Easy's philosophy. The women would not acknowledge the rights of men, whom they declared always to be in the wrong; and, as the gentlemen who visited Mr. Easy were all men of property, they could not perceive the advantage of sharing with those who had none. However, they allowed him to discuss the question, while they discussed his port. The wine was good, if the arguments were not, and we must take things as we find them in this world."

Could there be a brisker opening, a livelier, cleaner narrative style? The whole chapter is a model; the concluding paragraph as terse, businesslike, and sufficient as could be:

"In due course of time, Mrs. Easy presented her husband with a fine boy, whom we present to the public as our hero."

The epigrammatic economy of the style is preserved throughout the book. There is no straining after phrases. Marryat scatters freely little *mots* like, "A man who is able and willing to pay a large tavern bill will always find followers—that is to the tavern"; but these always arise directly out of the narrative

Life and Letters

—are never (as it were) stuck on. There is none of that terrible sermonising which adds immeasurably to the tedium of Henty and W. H. G. Kingston, and is, no doubt, supposed to be “good for boys.” Marryat closes his discussions like this: “Here an argument ensued upon love, which we shall not trouble the reader with, as it was not very profound, both sides knowing very little on the subject.” But we can stand more talk from Marryat’s heroes than from those of any writer of mere “books for boys.” For instance, Jack’s philosophisings about the rights of man, the ratiocinations by which he consoles himself in the most uncomfortable predicaments are done with delicious lightness. A typical example comes early, when, after practising his father’s equality notions at the expense of the farmer’s apples, he tumbles down the well, and, at the bottom, soliloquises :

“ ‘At all events,’ thought Jack, ‘if it had not been for the bull, I should have been watched by the dog, and then thrashed by the farmer ; but then again, if it had not been for the bull, I should not have tumbled among the bees ; and if it had not been for the bees, I should not have tumbled into the well ; and if it had not been for the chain, I should have been drowned. Such has been the chain of events, all because I wanted to eat an apple.

Midshipman Easy

“ ‘ However, I have got rid of the farmer, and the dog, and the bull, and the bees—all’s well that ends well ; but how the devil am I to get out of the well ? All creation appear to have conspired against the rights of man. As my father said, this is an iron age, and here I am swinging to an iron chain.’ ”

Where has that method been seen since ? There is something of it in Peacock. But where had it been seen before ? The answer is obvious to anyone who is familiar with the novels of Voltaire. I am not sufficiently acquainted with the biography of Marryat to know if there is evidence that he had read Voltaire. But his mode of narration is most obviously derived from Voltaire, and the relations between *Easy père* and Jack were, I should say, almost unquestionably suggested by those between Dr. Pangloss and Candide. It is a far cry from the subversive sceptic of Ferney to the English post captain ; but stranger connections have been established.

Marryat is unduly neglected. *Midshipman Easy* is beyond doubt his masterpiece ; but *Peter Simple* runs it very hard. These and *Poor Jack* and the *Pirate* and the *Three Cutters* certainly seem to me as works of art, as stories, and as pictures of life, fully equal to the novels of Smollett, even when one remembers *Humphry Clinker*. Yet *Peregrine Pickle* and *Roderick Random*, little though they may be read, are

Life and Letters

treated as classics in all text-books, whilst Marryat usually has to be contented with a paragraph or a mere "mention" in a list. Is it because his books interest boys and are therefore supposed to be fit for no one else? Perhaps he would be taken a little more seriously in this age of propaganda if the fact were recalled that he consciously (though not excessively) worked with a purpose. He desired not only to write amusing and exciting books, but to expose the brutalities and injustices of the Old Navy; and, just as the effects of Mr. Galsworthy's *Justice* were, by ministerial admission, immediately evident in prison legislation, so Marryat's *The King's Own* led to changes in naval administration as the Admiralty frankly acknowledged.

JANE CAVE

I WAS rummaging on a bookstall. I opened a book in faded boards and was struck by a remarkable frontispiece plate. It represented an eighteenth-century lady seated before a large volume and holding a quill pen in an impossibly placed hand. Her hair was elaborately dressed; on her shoulders she wore a lace wrap, on her head something like a beribboned lamp-shade, and on her face a seraphically complacent smile. The title-page was inscribed: "Poems on Various Subjects, Entertaining, Elegiac, and Religious. By Jane Cave. Winchester: Printed for the Author by J. Sadler, 1783." This was enough. I bought the book and found it remarkable.

Internal evidence suggests that this Miss Cave was a Methodist of Welsh extraction, that she held some superior household post, and that she was freely admitted to the society of her employers and their friends, though she "never forgot the deference due" to those "in a station above her." "Soft affluence," she explains (in a poem to an unkind lady who doubted if she composed the poems to which her name was attached), had not been her lot. But the Muse,

Life and Letters

*tho' she is a guest majestic
May deign to dwell in a domestic.*

Nevertheless, she explains elsewhere, she works under difficulties. No sooner has she felt inspiration than Duty intervenes :

*Now Duty's call I never must refuse,
I rise—and with a blush myself excuse.*

She lived, like Jane Austen, in a small world ; but, in spite of all impediments, she got enough out of that world to show her quality.

Her amorous and narrative poems are slightly disappointing. She employs the sham Latin names then in vogue ; a betrayed maiden is "Credulia" and her betrayer "Perfidio." These poems are mostly banal ; it is when she is writing of actual events and experiences that she becomes truly herself. A young soldier marries a young woman,

*Who proof remains 'gainst cannon balls and fire,
May by one glance from Sylvia's eyes expire.*

Here she addresses the man ; in another epithalamium she hails the lady who (this is the final crashing couplet) will never regret :

*That you declin'd the pleasing name of B—m
And that alone preferr'd of H—rag—m.*

The blanks appear in the original ; she little knew when she wrote that 130 years afterwards

Jane Cave

a man would spend half a morning trying, and failing, to complete the surnames which, made by so remarkable a coincidence, that useful rhyme. She was very adaptable. She wrote for one person a rebuke to a surly housemaid ; for another a poem on Castles. It is a fine performance, but put in the shade by her long metrical account of an excursion to a Ducal Seat at Itchen. "The morn did a bad day portend," but it cleared up. They had lunch, and then started for the mansion, where they experienced all the proper emotions :

*A while we after dinner sat,
Engaged in inoffensive chat,
Then arm in arm, in pairs we stalk,
And to his Grace's mansion walk.
Here, each apartment we behold,
Doth something of the Duke unfold.
Magnificence decks ev'ry place,
And speaks the owner is his Grace.
Some ancient portraits caught my eye,
Which bid my bosom heave a sigh,
For ah ! those once lov'd forms with reptiles lie.*

What a synonym !

Miss Cave was versatile. She wrote a poem on seeing Lady P. at church, where she was agreeably surprised to find that (in spite of her rank) Lady P. did not laugh or chatter ; she wrote another, "On Hearing Prophane Cursing and Swearing." But death was her

Life and Letters

favourite subject. The elegiac note is all-pervading, especially in a lament for a gardener who had left his favourite sphere for a better world, Miss Cave having the thankless task of catechising his plants as to his whereabouts :

*Hot-house or greenhouse, next I aske of you,
But ye unwilling are to tell me too,
Of ev'ry plant, and tree, and flower I ask,
But none will undertake the painful task.*

This is odd enough, but I doubt if there exists in the language so strange a series of elegies and epitaphs as Miss Cave groups together at the end of her volume. Some of them have lay subjects. There was a bereaved mother to whom each sympathetic herb and plant addressed consolation :

*Prepare, she cries—prepare to meet the blest,
And join your Sally in eternal rest.*

But clergymen were her peculiar forte. Whitfield was the most notable of her subjects ; the rest were obscure clerics who, unfortunately, all had names that were incongruous with high-flown surroundings. There was one, the Rev. Howel Harris :

*Advanc'd beyond their frowns, beyond their praise,
Harris with Angels tunes his grateful lays.
He sits with all those radiant hosts above,
And swims in seas of pure celestial love.*

Jane Cave

He certainly deserved his promotion ; his feats on earth are celebrated with unconscious blasphemy when Miss Cave hopes :

*That God from aye, to aye, may carry on
Th' amazing work which Harris hath begun.*

A fellow-subject, or victim, was the Reverend Mr. Watkins. On earth he left a gap. All

*With whom he did in Christian union meet
The death of Watkins greatly must regret.*

On the other hand :

*Hark ! how the Heavenly choir began to sing
A song of praise, when Watkins entered in.*

I wonder what was the motive of the man who suggested that so solemn a poetess and precise a moralist should tackle (as she once did) the subject of Love and Wine, Venus and Bacchus ? I don't think that " P. G., Esq., of Winchester," to whom is attributed the suggestion, can have been entirely serious. I see Miss Cave as a person, vain as Mr. Collins and voluble as Miss Bates, apt to go into a huff, very conscious of her own acquirements, in spite of her large assumption of modesty. " P. G., Esq." was tired of her pretence and her tongue, I think ; and when she coyly asked him what he would like her to write

Life and Letters

about, he named that most unsuitable of themes, and she—unaware of the twitching of his lips—at once attempted it.

Whoever and whatever she was she was certainly a nailer. Her book is badly produced, the pages go in and out, so that one is always turning over several at a time. It is obvious that she feared this when she was reading her proofs. It made her angry, and on the "Errata" page appears the following "Advertisement";

"Whereas the Printer of this work did engage with the Author that it should be printed and completely finished in an elegant, masterly manner, on a new type and good paper, all the same sort, size, and colour. Therefore, if upon inspection it is found not answerable to the above engagement, the Printer has violated his agreement, deceived and disappointed the Author, and is wholly accountable for the defect."

It must have been a very strong-minded woman who was able to compel her publisher to eat dirt in public like this. But she must have had her consolations. Her list of subscribers includes about two thousand names, and even at that several hundred names arrived too late for insertion. She groups them by towns: there are hundreds from Oxford, Salisbury, and Winchester, and little

Jane Cave

contingents from Cowes, Gosport, Fareham, Newbury, and other places. The "travelling" of the book must have been scientifically managed; never in history, I should think, have so many copies of so utterly feeble a book been sold in advance. And now nobody knows it!

GALLERIES

MR. JOSEPH DUVEEN has presented the nation with a sum of money to build a Gallery of Modern Foreign Art. It is certainly needed. The neglect of modern foreign art—especially French and Dutch art—has not been complete in this country; British collectors were early to appreciate the Barbizon school, and in the last fifteen years there has certainly been enough writing and exhibiting to familiarise the public with the nature of almost everything that has been done in Europe in our time. But, owing to lack of money, or conservatism, or timidity, or all of these, it is just to say that for our National Gallery modern painting does not exist. One or two donors have presented us with a few pictures by Corot, Daubigny, Diaz, and the Marises; Courbet may be found at South Kensington and a few provincial galleries have gone a little farther. But it is nobody's business to watch what is being done and to see—to put it crudely—that we get in early and cheap. As things stand there are masters, recognised as such by competent persons in every country, who are

Galleries

quite unrepresented in the national collections, and of whom, if things went on as they are, we should, fifty years hence, be buying inferior examples at prodigious prices. We need not have been quite so badly off as we are. If Dr. Bode was able—as he was—to acquire pictures by Cézanne and hang them at Berlin (Cézanne and his contemporaries are also to be seen at Munich), and if the Rejks Museum at Amsterdam found van Gogh worthy of a room to himself, it is clear that the care of a collection of old masters, and the liking for them, does not necessarily preclude a judgment upon and taste for what has been done quite recently. But our National Gallery has laboured under obvious difficulties, and a new gallery and separate control is the obvious solution. There will be little difficulty in starting such a collection. France, Belgium, and Holland will provide the obvious basis, Corot and his contemporaries, the Marises, Mauve, probably Israels and Bosboom. The more venerable critics will be shocked when (as they will have to) Gaugin and Cézanne get in; but they will scarcely lift their voices against Renoir and Dégas—who, if I remember rightly, are still totally unrepresented in London. There are dozens of other Frenchmen of all sizes from Manet to Boudin and Cazin. Spain, Sweden, and, if we are really enterprising, Russia, will provide something. It will not be necessary to buy anything

Life and Letters

German. Since Durer and Altdorfer it can only be supposed that German painters have written music. Lenbach was a good academic portrait painter; Menzel (whom they attempted to pass off as a great master), a skilful, if dull, illustrator; the colour of the romantic Böcklin has to be seen to be believed; and the best of the living Germans would not be conspicuous in our current art shows. We must be grateful for the new gallery; but I should like to add a few qualifying remarks.

To illustrate the limitations of these huge public collections a parallel from literature may be drawn. They are like anthologies. The National Gallery resembles one of those works which give in five or ten volumes representative selections from the world's Greatest Masters, specimens drawn from all countries and periods. The Tate Gallery is like an anthology of nineteenth century literature; the new Duveen Gallery will be like a volume of selections from modern foreign writers. Picture galleries have disadvantages peculiar to themselves, of course. If they are overcrowded with pictures, one cannot escape the clash and confusion by "opening" a wall at one place and then shutting it up again; if they are overcrowded with people concentration is difficult. And in the ordinary way, so much trouble and time are involved in reaching them, that the visitor, not knowing when he will be there again, is

Galleries

faced with the necessity of either rushing through them or getting tired limbs and a crick in the neck. But their principal defect as an element in "artistic education" is inseparable from their principal merit; they cover too much ground and they cover it inadequately. Large and, within their reference, "complete" anthologies are, like histories of literature, indispensable to those who desire to find their way about. Without such works we might never come into contact with those writers who are most likely to appeal to us. Were it not for the few examples of the early Flemings in the National Gallery many a man might never have gone to Belgium and Berlin to see the Memlings and the van Eycks, the Matsys and the Patinirs, the van der Weydens, Davids, and van der Goes. But you cannot get the fullest and the intensest pleasure out of Milton and Keats by reading the examples of them, however numerous, in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*; still less can you fully know and enjoy Vermeer or Mantegna from one or two pictures in a National Gallery. It is highly desirable that we should have these enormous museums of pictures, in order that we may easily know the best that has been done in the world and discover, whether we are practising art or merely "consuming" it, our affinities. But it will be a bad thing if all the good pictures in the world get sprinkled evenly throughout the world's great galleries, each gallery achiev-

Life and Letters

ing its aim of getting one or two examples of every good painter.

Whenever I see even a single good picture well hung in a private house I reflect how much more pleasure I get out of it there than I should have done had I seen it amid the conflicting clamours of a heterogeneous public gallery. And it is surely a commonplace of observation that an unusual degree of enjoyment is obtained at a gallery which is so fortunate as to possess a whole room, or a whole wall, of one artist's works. How much less effective would the Giotto's at Assisi be were they scattered throughout the capitals of Europe; how much more effective would the great Ghent altarpiece be if it were reunited instead of being in pieces at Ghent, Brussels, and Berlin. No man can get the most out of Rubens, Velasquez or Turner unless he has seen the Rubenses at Antwerp or Munich, the Velasquez at the Prado, or the Turners at the Tate. Surely the ideal would be a dual system under which the great miscellaneous collections were supplemented by small, public collections devoted to particular artists or groups of artists. I do not know what sort of public gallery, if any, is owned by the City of Norwich. The only time I was ever there I saw the Cathedral and then found so admirable a hostelry that I was not tempted to explore further. But if it has one I am sure it would be much more delightful and

Galleries

useful were it entirely composed of the best works of old Crome and two or three other Norwich artists, than if it contained, like most provincial galleries, a mixture of minor local works, ephemeral academic successes and dubious old masters, landscapes by Binks, poor copies of Titian and Palma Vecchio, and painted acres by Mr. Blair Leighton or Mr. Sigismund Goetze. We ought to diffuse our masterpieces as widely as possible without breaking up the groups. And I don't think there is any doubt that a small town or a country place is a better setting for a one man gallery than a room or a separate building in a large city.

Three considerable collections exist of works by the late G. F. Watts. People differ, understandably, about his eminence; but he will do as an illustration. There is the collection of portraits in the National Portrait Gallery; there is the room full of allegories, including most of his major works at the Tate; and there is the miscellaneous gallery, filled mostly with small things, at his home near Guildford. For myself I remember that when I visited the last, one small room in a village with trees all around and a haycart in the road, I got more pleasure out of it than I have ever got out of the others, which are surrounded with crowds of other pictures, and have to be approached first through London streets and then through turnstiles

Life and Letters

laden with catalogues and guarded by braided commissionaires. I remember thinking that had I my way I would shift half the Tate Wattses to Compton to join the others. Suppose that the cream of Constable were established similarly at Flatford on the Stour, in a little white building by the mill, where his own river runs through his own valley. Suffolk would have an added attraction; Constable would be seen to better advantage than he ever has been; and a pilgrimage to Flatford would be as exciting as a visit to Haarlem, where, in a very small and otherwise not notable collection, one finds the great series of Halses, painted in and for his own town, and still there to his and the town's glory. Provincial towns beginning collections, and philanthropists making collections which they intend to leave to the public, would do well to bear this in mind. They should specialise; and where there is a local product worth it, they should specialise in that.

INITIALS

WHENEVER a journalist wants to write something, and lacks a peg, he invents a correspondent who (he states) "writes to" ask, point out, confirm, contradict, qualify, complain about, suggest, or urge something or other. I have done it myself. On this occasion, however, the correspondent is a real one. He is real, and I have very great respect for him, although I have never seen him. And although the question he asks, the fact he points out, the practice he complains about, and the changes he suggests or urges, have in the first instance a purely personal relation to myself, I feel justified in mentioning it because it opens up larger issues.

The correspondent says, in his mild and diffident way, "Why the hell do you sign your articles with initials?" Initials, he argues, do not "get over the footlights"; they do not suggest a personality; they are not rememberable. "Surely your initials *stand for* something. They did not christen you with initials. What does this 'J' represent?" A part of this contention I will admit frankly

Life and Letters

and without hesitation. The custom of christening people with initials—although, I believe, long prevalent in the United States, where X, Q, P, and Z commonly do duty for a second name—has never caught hold in this country. “J” does stand for something. What is it?

Well, it may be Jabez. It may be Joseph, James, Jonah, Jeremiah, Josiah, Jehu, Jeroboam, Jedediah, Jasper, Joshua, Jenkin, Joab, Jehoianim, Jehoahash, Jehosophat, or Jerub-babel. If it were Jerubbabel, I cannot deny that “Jerubbabel C. Squire” would “get over the footlights.” It would be remembered by every man who had seen it, even casually on a bookstall, for one second; it might even hoist me into universal fame. On the other hand, if it *were* Jerubbabel, my motives for suppressing it would be obvious, and even universal fame and an enormous fortune may be purchased too dearly. But before we investigate its actual nature further, let us examine more closely this gentleman’s general contentions.

That you do get used to a name is certainly true, and the familiar name is as much part of an author’s “publicity outfit” as is the trade name of a brand of sardines or stove-polish. A new play by Geo. B. Shaw would take some time fighting its way unless there were elaborate explanations (which there certainly would be if the change were made) by Mr. Bernard Shaw that this was his new style of address. “G.

Initials

Keith Chesterton" might stand a chance; the author's surname is long and uncommon. But H. George Wells or Herbert G. Wells would be asking for neglect, and the name of Sir Thos. Caine on a new novel would be greeted by the public with stares of apathetic non-comprehension. But let it be observed that there is almost every sort of variety in the signatures by which these eminent men have already become known. Mr. Shaw customarily writes both his Christian names in full, or begins with an initial and writes the second name at length. Sir Hall Caine suppresses his first name and displays his second. And the other two confine themselves to initials. Yet I do not think it can fairly be said that Mr. Chesterton is obscure behind the "G. K." or that Mr. Wells has hid his light under bushels of "H. Gs."

I think the truth of it is that initials stick just as well as names, but they take longer to stick. They take longer to stick because they have no intrinsic interest. They have no flavour. There are exceptions. Mr. Chesterton has turned the series "G. K. C." into a kind of word, with a tone of its own like any other word; and if an author arose who signed his name "G. K. Chatterton" or "G. K. Chipps," we should have prepossessions about him, expect certain things from him, and retain a memory of him if only with the result of confusing him with his initial-sake. Again,

Life and Letters

there *are* series of initials which have a wholly accidental individuality which makes them fix themselves at once. If a man's initials are "P. I. G." or "F. O. O. L." we neither forget it nor allow him to forget it; if the name at the head of this article were "A. S. Squire," I think it would get over the footlights all right. Its bray would be ringing in the reader's ears long after he had laid down the paper. But leaving exceptional cases out of account, initials, becoming pseudo-words by familiarity, differ among themselves in value and beauty just as words do. A mass of associations cling around them, and they have sound-sequences which affect us (we unconscious) just as the vowels and consonants in ordinary words do. Without knowing it, we probably dislike innocent initials which have been borne by people whom we have detested; without knowing it, we are enchanted with certain initials because they come trailing clouds of glory from the past or because they have a pleasant rippling sound. Here we get on to the influence of sounds. It is a difficult matter. All we can say is that *other things being equal* some words are more beautiful than others: all writers know this. But it is equally true that sound will not go all the way: that good associations may make ugly syllables seem beautiful and bad ones may make beautiful open vowels sound ugly. It is hard to detach the word from the object. We have only to look at the

Initials

word "Keats" to realise how horrible we should think it had Keats been a vulgar writer ; and even the word "moon" would seem ugly if it connoted something red and writhing in the entrails of a fish. You may test the truth of this by experimenting with a word which can be used in two very different senses. Such a word is "lights." To my ear it is not a pleasant-sounding word, merely as a word. But it can seem one thing and the other. Think of it in connection with all the beautiful lights in the world—the stars, candles in a great old chamber, the lights of a city seen from a great distance, the lights of cottages in a forest, or of dawn over the sea—and it seems a beautiful, soft, lingering word fit to be rhymed (as it always is) with "nights." Think of it as the name of those vague atrocities which are hawked in mean streets as "catsmeat," and it becomes a vile spluttering word fit only for that base use. But I wander.

So let us return whence we started. There was one name that I omitted from that engaging list of designations beginning "J." There are no doubt others ; but I haven't my old Testament with me. The name I refer to is John. It has been borne by many illustrious men and an innumerable multitude of the obscure. It was made glorious by John Milton, John Keats, John Donne, John Ford ; and at various times it has renewed its lustre in John Ketch, King John, twenty-two Pope

Life and Letters

Johns, John Galsworthy, John Masefield, John Peel, John Corlett, John Smith, John Jones, John Robinson, and John Barleycorn. There was also Friar John, Brother John of the Funnels, doughtiest, thirstiest, and, very likely, most learned of all. There is no name like it. Fashions in other names come and go. Thomas and William slump and boom. Geraldts, Lucians, Marmadukes, Susans, Peggys, Margarets, Marjories, are the rage of a generation, and then become sickening to the palate. A countess digs up the name Gladys for her daughter ; in ten years it covers the country ; in another fifty it sinks into disrepute ; and then it goes on flourishing in dark byways until some new explorer produces it once more as a fresh and radiant thing. But John goes on. From the ages when it was spelt Jehan to the present day the proportion of Johns to the total population has probably never fluctuated beyond one or two per cent. It is as fixed as the English landscape and the procession of the seasons. And, like sun, moon, and stars, roses and oaks, the yearly renewing miracle of the woods and the cornfields, it never becomes wearisome or tarnished. Time does not make stale its infinite sameness ; the most fickle slaves in Fashion's retinue cannot contract a positive distaste for it ; in its dignity, solidity, greenness and grave mystery, it defies the weakness of those who tire of all things. Nothing affects it ; nothing can bring it into

Initials

contempt; it stands like a rock amid the turbulent waves of human history, as fine and noble a thing now as it was when it first took shape on human lips. It is a name to live up to; but if one who bears it sinks into disrepute it falls not with him, but rather stays in the firmament above him, shining down upon him like a reproachful star.

But I do not see why I should say what my own name is if I don't want to.

RECITATION IN PUBLIC

THE other day there was given in London a public recitation of poetry. Eleven authors delivered passages from their own works to an audience of a hundred and fifty ladies who paid two guineas each, the money going to a charity. As two of the regular contributors to this paper were amongst the performers I had better say nothing about the performance. Only this: That one of the two, gallantly endeavouring to get his verses off without referring to his book, got tied up towards the end. He left lines out, put lines in, got lines in the wrong order, and, being resolved not to break down, shamelessly vamped and gagged. Apparently the candour of his demeanour was such that nobody noticed.

It is highly probable that these recitations will become a permanent institution, analogous to Chamber Concerts. The prevailing notion is that there is something ridiculous about standing up in public and reciting poetry. But all human actions are ridiculous, properly regarded; and this one is certainly no more ridiculous than acting or playing the flute in public. Flute-players, in fact, are most

Recitation in Public

ridiculous. It is quite evident that verse ought to be spoken aloud. If a man takes pains to make his work musical, it is more than ridiculous that it should never be heard save by the "inward ear." In earlier ages nobody questioned this. When, as Mr. Kipling elegantly puts it: "'Omer smote 'is bloomin' lyre," his lyre was merely the background of his declamation, and the finest early English poetry has reached us by oral transmission. When minstrels turned into authors recitation died—or, rather, was left to the unintelligent. In this country, until recently, the general craving to hear verse well spoken has been ministered to only by imbeciles, who, at bazaars and smoking concerts, make audiences shuffle uneasily in their seats while they roar *Out with the Lifeboat*, *Kissing Cup's Race*, or Tennyson's *The Revenge*. Millions at functions in aid of the choir outing or at annual concerts of local literary societies must have heard this last, and felt their flesh creep as the orator leant forward and daintily fluttered his fingers when he came to "a pinnace like a fluttered bird came flying from far away." The poets themselves have abstained from public appearances. But their knowledge that recitation was better than silent reading has usually led them to read aloud in private. Tennyson, "rolling out his hollow oes and aes," was heard by many, and Swinburne, as we now learn, would oblige if asked, and chant his composi-

Life and Letters

tions in a shrill voice which, at exciting points, rose into a scream. If, however, good verse gains by being read aloud, it is obviously illogical to restrict such performances to private houses : and in the last few years the recognition of this fact has spread. The revival is mainly due to Mr. Yeats, who thought out and perfected a technique of recitation and began giving readings from his own poems. To his inspiration was probably due the action of the proprietors of the Poetry Bookshop in Devonshire Street, who have for some years given recitals at regular and frequent intervals, amongst those who have appeared being Mr. Yeats, Mr. Hewlett, Mr. Masfield, Mr. Sturge Moore, and Rupert Brooke. The Americans, who have a passion for lectures of all sorts, have taken to arranging tours of English poets ; two or three of them are there now, reading to immense audiences at, I hope, great profit to themselves. The practice is going to grow. And for two reasons. One is that good recitation is artistically interesting : the other is that there will be money in it.

Now there is, unhappily, no reason to suppose that because a man can write a musical thing, he will necessarily be a good reader. For instance, he might be dumb. Failing that quite disabling infirmity, he may have a bad voice, he may have an imperfect control over his voice, he may have a physical appearance so unimpressive that no amount of

Recitation in Public

emotional force can counterbalance it, or he may be so reserved that he is quite unable to display his intimate feelings in public. It is one thing to wear your heart on your sleeve in print: and quite another to stand face to face with an audience and expose your tenderest emotions and noblest aspirations. If an author himself *has* the necessary histrionic gifts, voice, and audacity, he is the best person to hear; as he should know better than anyone else exactly the flow and stress of his language. But the important thing is not that we should hear the words spoken by the person who wrote them (if it were, recitations from dead poets would be impossible), but that they should be spoken by people with sufficient intelligence to understand them. Most Shakespearean actors do not understand Shakespeare's verse, and have no idea whatever about rhythm. They either spout their lines with the mechanical regularity of a metronome, or gabble and garble them with the avowed object of making them resemble prose as closely as possible. What is wanted is a reciter with all a good poet's critical taste: one who, whether or not a practising artist himself, can give language and rhythms the values that the composer meant them to have.

My observations at the recent performance led to several conclusions, which may be worth recording. One is that there is more in the technique of recitation than many good

Life and Letters

natural readers might suppose. A man may have all the necessary attributes of voice, understanding, and emotional force; but there is room for study. This is especially so with poets. The line about Tennyson's "oes and aes" is significant. To a poet a musical line has a tendency to present itself as a succession of beautiful vowel sounds. Vowel sounds, in certain sequences, *are* beautiful. Properly enunciated, with right tonal inflexion, the syllables "la, la, la, la," may be delivered so as to produce quite melting effects. Why that is so may be left to Students of Evolution to determine; they will probably establish a connexion with the love-song of the megatherium to its mate; or the tuneful warnings addressed to the herd by the chief bull bison when he scented danger. At any rate, people who read musical verse aloud are apt to dwell so lovingly on the vowels that they forget to make the consonants clear: the word "bite" at the end of a line sounds to the audience like "bi." I think, again, that the lighting of the auditorium wants considering. However much in harmony the souls of the audience may be with the reciter, what he sees in a lighted room is not their souls but their hats: which are distracting. The darkened auditorium has its drawbacks: it makes one feel rather unnatural; and if it is accompanied, as it is at the Poetry Bookshop, by lighted candles on the platform, it produces so ecclesi-

Recitation in Public

astical an atmosphere that the audience dare not applaud or laugh without a sense of sin or at least solecism.

But the most important thing is this : that if the Art of Recitation is to have a fair chance, it should be understood that to get much out of a recital you ought—unless the subject matter is very simple—to be fairly familiar beforehand with the works recited. The ordinary concert-goer does not expect to “take in” a new symphony properly the first time he hears it ; and he habitually gets most of his pleasure out of hearing again things that he has heard before. You do not follow verses half so well the first time you hear them as you do the first time you read them : the ear cannot take the sort of instantaneous survey that the eye takes. The simplest poem, if unfamiliar, sounds obscure when read aloud. Finally, it is, I think, evident that a programme with several names on it is better than a programme filled by a single executant. One man’s voice—in a public as in a private room—if heard for two consecutive hours, almost inevitably reduces one to a condition of mental coma if it does not actually send one to sleep.

These remarks are, I know, fragmentary. But nobody who has heard good recitation could fail to appreciate the unexploited possibilities of the craft. And if it develops it will have the incidental advantage of supplying poets with incomes. Homer sang probably

Life and Letters

in the open air, and got nothing but his keep. But two-guinea seats, or even five-shilling ones, mean something ; and even if the authors do not themselves recite and do not even get a percentage on proceeds, there never was so effective a form of advertisement of their books. The greatest trouble with good modern literature has been to make people who would like it aware of its existence.

HUMANE EDUCATION

IT is evident that we are in for a prolonged struggle about education. Everybody is agreed—except the dwindling minority who have a sentimental preference for illiterate and deferential simpletons—that the quality and quantity of our education must be improved after the war. But there is a violent divergence of opinion as to what “improvement” is, what sort of things we are increasingly to teach. Strong sections of industrials who still imagine that men can be mere machines and are at their best as machines if they are mere machines are already menacing what they call “useless” education. They deride the classics, and they are mildly contemptuous of history, philosophy, and English. They want our educational institutions, from the oldest University to the youngest elementary school, to concentrate on business or the things that are patently useful in business. Technical instruction is to be provided for adolescent artisans; book-keeping and shorthand for prospective clerks; and the cleverest we are to set to “business methods,” to modern languages (which can

Life and Letters

be used in correspondence with foreign firms), and to science (which can be applied to industry). French and German are the languages, not of Montaigne and Goethe, but of Schmidt Brothers, of Elberfeld, and Dupont et Cie., of Lyons. Chemistry and physics are not explorations into the physical constitution of the universe, but sources of new dyes, new electric light filaments, new means of making things which can be sold cheap and fast to the Nigerian and the Chinese. For Latin there is a limited field so long as the druggists insist on retaining it in their prescriptions. Greek has no apparent use at all, unless it be as a source of syllables for the hybrid names of patent medicines and metal polishes. The soul of man, the spiritual basis of civilisation—what gibberish is that?

It is against blind and ruinous bigotry of that kind that Professor Gilbert Murray has written his *Religio Grammatici* (Allen & Unwin). Professor Murray is a Professor of Greek. He has spent most of his life studying Greek, and is openly unrepentant. Lest it be supposed that he is merely—a thing frequently suggested of those who support the ancient tongues—defending his own vested interests, it may be added that were Greek forbidden by a Defence of the Realm Act regulation produced by some Business Government of the future, he would be equally competent as a Professor of English. At all events, his present plea is

Humane Education

not a plea for Greek and Latin exclusively. He argues, with reason, that we are mainly what we are and know most of what we know because the Greeks and Latins, pagan and Christian, lived before us. With them we find the origins of our religious and political institutions, of our literature, to a great extent of our language, of our mathematics, mechanics, law, and morals. Whatever the percentage of Jute and Angle blood in us, we are not the children of the Jutes. The Germans themselves, who have far more Teutonic blood in them, do not draw from Teutonic sources such things as they have in common with civilised Europe, and when the ex-Kaiser exhorted the youths of Germany to be "little Germans, not little Greeks and Romans," he was asking them to cut away the ground they stand on. In Aristophanes and Horace we find (with local differences) ourselves; in *Beowulf* we find something remote and savage, much more alien from ourselves, thinking and feeling in strange categories, and talking in language most remarkably strange.

Professor Murray, however, in urging the retention of the classics as an element in education, does not make the mistake (made often by their supporters and always by their opponents) of treating them as a separate and peculiar thing. He regards them as part—though a very large part—of our past, as Europeans, and of the past of the human race

Life and Letters

as a whole. As such, they have—and the advantages they offer are shared, in varying degree, by all literary and historical studies—great advantages to offer. They offer to the individual what is at lowest a continual source of enjoyment and entertainment, and at highest much more. Professor Murray says that pure science offers “an escape from the world about him, an escape from the noisy present into a region of facts which are as they are, and not as foolish human beings want them to be; an escape from the commonness of daily happenings into the remote world of high and severely trained imagination; an escape from mortality in the service of a growing and durable purpose, the progressive discovery of truth.” That is the literary man’s tribute to a mode of intellectual discovery which is not his; of the mode which is his he speaks thus :

“The Philistine,” the vulgarian, the Great Sophist, the passer of base coin for true, he is all about us and, worse, he has his outposts inside us, persecuting our peace, spoiling our sight, confusing our values, making a man’s self seem greater than the race and the present thing more important than the eternal. From him and his influence we find our escape by means of the Grammata into that calm world of theirs, where stridency and clamour are forgotten in the ancient stillness, where the

Humane Education

strong iron is long since rusted and the rocks of granite broken into dust, but the great things of the human spirit still shine like stars pointing Man's way onward to the great triumph or the great tragedy, and even the little things, the beloved and tender and funny and familiar things, beckon across gulfs of death and change with a magic poignancy, the old things that our dead leaders and forefathers loved, *viva adhuc et desiderio pulciora* ("Living still and more beautiful because of our longing"). . .

But let us be more "practical." Literary records being in the main the records of conspicuous men and conspicuous races their study offers the spiritual and intellectual examples which are a perpetual source of new effort. The virtues, without which great new enterprise (even commercial enterprise) cannot be carried through, are not so common all round us that we can spare the contemplation of the great achievements of the dead. As Professor Murray suggests, progress in historical times has consisted, as far as we can tell, in the accumulation of knowledge and material objects; we cannot afford to neglect Pericles and St. Francis merely because they never used a telephone. Sir Philip Sidney—scarcely the type of the spectacled and ineffective recluse—said that he never heard the old Ballad of Chevy Chase, but his

Life and Letters

heart was stirred as it were by a trumpet. Take the humblest of examples: Bruce and the Spider, which has been set before scores of millions of British children. It had its uses, though it taught the "pedestrian virtue of pertinacity." It may be that the Great Film, or the Man who Saved the Empire, will be deemed in the future adequate substitute for that anecdote: but even that is historical education, literary education, education which (whatever utility it may have to others) cannot be supposed to increase the ability of those who see it to earn their own living save in so far as it gives them not technical, but moral, assistance. And, finally, if you are to think about the future, your "conjectures will not be much good unless you have in some way studied other places and other ages." All literature is, in a sense, social science; we learn from it what men are, what can be done with them, where they have failed, where and under what conditions they have succeeded.

All this is trite, and has been said (though not so well as by Professor Murray) ten thousand times. Nevertheless, in Mr. Chesterton's old image, the wall will go black if you don't keep on whitewashing it. The world at this moment contains a great many people who think—or, rather, think they think, or, rather, talk as if they thought they thought—that man exists for the two only purposes of producing goods, and more men to eat and

Humane Education

wear them ; and who talk also as though our little life were not rounded by a sleep, with something beyond it. They will be on the ramp when the world settles down ; the dons (who feel very solitary and timid and unsupported) may not realise how much backing they can command if they only begin to fight ; and some supporters of the humanities ridiculously and disastrously argue as if Greek and Latin were the only indispensables and the endowment of scientific research somehow incompatible with them. They would be better advised to yield a little as to compulsory classics, and to endeavour to secure that if Greek and Latin be not compulsorily studied, then the literature and history of England should be. We should never have had half the uproar about the classics if their more pedantic and conventional champions had not so systematically ignored the claims of English, which is, after all, even more important for us than Latin and Greek. It is a good thing to know Homer, but it is preposterous for an Englishman to know Homer and never to have opened Chaucer. If the humanities are to be saved, the ground of defence will have to be shifted a little.

A SUBJECT

GOING into the country for a week-end (without the least intention of beginning this page bestially with a participle), I found that I had left at home the book which I had intended to review. Had it been a book of argument, that need not have been much of a difficulty; for I could have mentioned the book's name and then argued with and about everybody else who had ever dealt with the matter under consideration. But it was a collection of letters, and you cannot review a collection of letters without quoting from them, or, at least, reading them: that is, unless you are cleverer than I am or more impudent than I dare to be. The result was that I found myself with "nothing to write about."

The situation must be a familiar one to every routine writer; and I conceive that all men meet it in the same way. They wish that they had gone to the Straits Settlements to plant rubber at Kuala Lumpur or some such place; or that they had become doctors or professional soldiers; or that they had gone into the Civil Service, or that they had jumped

A Subject

at that opening on the Stock Exchange. They madden those around them with their querulous complaints, beneath which there seems to be an implication that it is a monstrous injustice that a subject has not been provided by family, or friends, or rained down from heaven by Providence. They sit down, get up, walk about, pull their hair, pick up papers and look at them, open books and begin to read, though they know time presses, smoke pipes and cigarettes alternately, spill ashes, talk jerkily to dogs and cats, wish they were rich, write headlines in a fair, round hand, draw faces, and put down words like "The," "Everybody" (and "Going"), in the hope that they will start trains of thought—or, at any rate, trains of words, which are the next best thing. The clock ticks on as remorselessly as it did to Faustus; the time of train or post approaches; the game seems up; suicide presents itself as a remedy for life's ills; reason interposes that the worst troubles can be survived; and in the end something happens. As a fact, no editor ever gets letters from regular essayists saying "Excuse me this week, I have no ideas." The pressure of necessity forces the door and something rushes in.

So it was with what I was long ago warned not to call "oneself." I had told myself twenty times that I had nothing to write about; I had ransacked my memory in vain for

Life and Letters

fragments of some recent intelligent conversation which might have raised some literary problem of interest; I had searched several papers and many shelves for something which might appear capable of exposition or dispute; I had finally sat down in a sulk; and then an Inner Voice repeated "nothing to write about" in tones of contempt. Justly; for what nonsense it was! To begin with, there is "Nothing" itself, a subject which has not been exhausted, though it has been glorified by a dead poet and a living essayist. And, apart from nothing, there is anything and everything else, including (as was long ago observed) a broomstick. A change came over my brain, and I felt suddenly as though I could write, with equal fecundity, on anything in the world. My mind, my body, the room, the landscape, the sky, the universe instantaneously became crowded with subjects all clamouring to be investigated.

That is what is known as the awakening of the imagination, a process that may take place in all sorts of ways: that may be brought about by a word, a sound, a scent, a drink. The world, that seemed a collection of lifeless matter, is suddenly invested with wonder; all things spring to life and are clothed with infinite associations; every object recovers its history and its mystery—which is history undisclosed. Every shape and colour acquires interest, every aspect of every object asks

A Subject

questions. Here, at this moment, I look at my hand, my moving hand. I see it as the slave of will, the prodigious garment of soul ; as a concourse of chemicals drawn together by unimaginable forces ; as the heir of innumerable ancestors, paws and claws and tendrils. I pore over the elevations and depressions, the nails and the little hairs, the pits whence the little hairs grow, the ribs and wrinkles of the skin, never the same on any two human hands. I think of chiromancy, and wonder how began the human belief that a man's fate was written on his hands ; who it was named those thin, pink streaks and girdles by the names of Life and Venus and Mars ; and why so remarkable a doctrine should have started if there was no truth in it. How interesting it would be to pursue that speculation, to meditate on it and to examine the reflections of other men on it, of the ancients, of Paracelsus perhaps, of modern doctors. The mind travels to Bertillon and Scotland Yard ; to finger-prints on windows and wood-work ; to greasy and bloody finger-prints ; to counter-detective work ; to gloves. At that word gloves, all the gloves in the world soar into sight : velvet gloves, the gauntlet of the King's champion, the glove that the heartless French lady flung among the lions for the *seigneur* to pick up, gloves to which men have written songs, gloves of an ancient fashion kept in lavender with faded letters.

Life and Letters

And, returning, I think of metaphorical hands, of the hands of fate and the hands of destiny; of symbolical hands, of clouds no bigger than a man's hand, of finger-posts and pointers; of sculptured hands, the giant hand of Rodin; of real hands, hands long dust, Queen Mary's, and Alexander's that curbed Bucephalus; of Lady Macbeth's little hand from which no waters could wash the stain, of the white hands of Iseult of Brittany, and the pale hands that the ghosts stretched out across Acheron.

How easy it would be to write a large book about hands; how impossible to exhaust their beauties and their strangenesses, their diversity and multitude of their works. But why linger on the hand? There is the pen also. It is a fountain-pen, and has to be dipped continually in an inkpot; but, though degenerate as an individual, it is the scion of a wonderful race. Its very name is history in a crystal, and memorises the wing of the goose with strong quills. Steel pens and gold pens, now dominant, are but newcomers; the stylus had a longer and a wider reign; there is also the brush, which the Chinese—whose ink the French call *chinoise* and we Indian—prefer; there are also fingers, which, used by prisoners and dying travellers for writing messages in their own blood, have established a peculiarly intimate link between the hand and the pen. Then, the characters of pens, their racial peculiarities and habits:

A Subject

the broad pens, the fine pens, the new pen that refuses to take ink, the old one that is encrusted; the wilfulness of the pen that crosses; the mania of pens for the collection of hairs; the difficulties of removing such hairs; smudges; blots; the problem of what size blot really matters, and when. Here, in looking at the operation of writing, we come upon a large area of human life and activity; yet who has explored it and analysed its content? One thinks into it like a man digging in a cave; the more one discovers the larger the surface exposed to research.

I come to the ink. How is it made? I don't know; if I looked it up in the encyclopaedia, I should find a whole article about that. I fancy that gall and lamp-black come in. What is gall? What things have been done with ink! How much ink has been shed by journalists in noble causes! How pathetic is the yellowness of old ink! How true is that observation of the anonymous Caroline that we should have very little to drink if all the sea were ink. A great vista opens up from ink.

The pen, the ink, the table-cloth (black and white check); paper; a blue bowl full of oddments; a window; brick chimneys; bare elms; a mottled sky. Below, a garden and plants in winter sleep; a pond where fat goldfish used to be, and probably still are, waving to and fro with gaping and closing

Life and Letters

mouths, amid a green growth, hiding under flat leaves, diving out of sight, rising bright to the surface. Fields, farms, churches, trains, towns, London, the sea. Each word is the head of a comet with an infinite tail of coloured light. I am humiliated at the variety and splendour of things and ashamed of my own dullness. Never again, I say, shall I feel that there is nothing to write about. . . .

But I shall.

GOAKS AND HUMOUR

THERE are a great many books about Wit and Humour. Hobbes thought one laughed because one felt superior ; Bergson thinks that the comic is always the animate imitating the mechanical ; and Kant thought something else, I forget what. The last treatise I read was by the German Professor Freud, who appeared anxious to prove that wit and humour are a kind of sexual perversions. But I still do not understand what they are, and I have something better to do than make my head ache by attempting to invent satisfactory, or even unsatisfactory, definitions of them. If it is difficult to define wit and humour, it is equally difficult to discriminate precisely between the humour of one nation and the humour of another. There certainly are differences. But probably there is no special *form* of joke that can be appreciated by every American, and by no Englishman, or *vice-versa*. And there is a great deal of American humorous writing which might have been done by Englishmen. We are accustomed to think of our humour, at its best, as a quieter and wiser thing, urbane

Life and Letters

and sympathetic. But Washington Irving and Holmes are (subject matter apart) as English as Lamb, if those are our qualities; and many other Americans, in some ways very Transatlantic (O. Henry and Twain are examples), are masters of the richer and deeper humour as well as of the other sort. Bret Harte's *Condensed Novels*, again, might have been written by a very restrained European parodist. And when Thoreau said that "the profession of doing good is full," and Ambrose Bierce defined a bottle-nose as "A nose fashioned in the image of its Maker," their mots were in the traditional European mould. There are, however, kinds of humour in which the Americans have specialised; the body of American humorous literature is as peculiar as it is extensive. We have had practitioners in dialect and humorous bad spelling; but there is a difference between them and Josh Billings, Artemus Ward, who invented the Goak, and Mr. Dooley. We have had humorous travellers, but they are not like Mark Twain. Where lies the difference?

American humour, of the distinctively American sort, gains something from the peculiar flavour of the American dialect. There was a man who travelled in a sleeping car on a railway. During the night he was annoyed by vermin, and he wrote to the headquarters of the company to complain. He received back from the administrative head a letter of immense

Goaks and Humour

effusiveness. Never before had such a complaint been lodged against this scrupulously careful line, and the management would have suffered any loss rather than cause annoyance to so distinguished a citizen as, etc., etc. He was very delighted with this abject apology. But as he was throwing away the envelope there fell out a slip of paper, which had, apparently, been enclosed by mistake. On it was a memorandum: "Send this guy the bug-letter." One need not explain how this joke gains from the peculiarity of the language. (It has incidentally another feature which is traditionally a characteristic of much American humour—namely, laconicism. All nations have their laconics; but brevity has always been a popular cult in the U.S.A. A typical example both of this and of an equally common habit of allusiveness is the remark of the Yankee at the Zoo, who, for the first time in his life, saw a giraffe. He looked at it long and hard, and then observed: "I don't believe it.") The language does give a tinge to American jests: and, naturally, an even more important element is the sum of American social conditions and history. The unique circumstances of American life are directly responsible to some of the striking things about American humour.

A noticeable thing about American humour—one doesn't mean merely the efforts of a few few prominent humorists—is the range it

Life and Letters

covers. Few things are sacred, and few are too serious to be jested about. Cutting loose from Europe and all its traditions (the breach here is rather closing up than widening), and living in a new country, where the normal life was adventurous and changeful, and anything might turn up at any moment, the American developed a curious detachment. With this came a philosophic whimsicality, which treated everything lightly and saw everything on the comic plane. We in Europe have all sorts of taboos. We are serious about many things; and if we are serious about a thing we do not (unless we are exceptional people) jest about it. The normal American humorist jests about everything (however strongly he may feel about it), from his wife downwards. He will even make jests about millionaires, a thing which to most Englishmen seems shocking. If you detach yourself sufficiently from things, everything on earth will appear a little comic, as indeed it is. This habit of standing outside things has been general in America. When Artemus Ward wrote his letter to the Prince of Wales: "Friend Wales—You remember me. I saw you in Canady a few years ago. I remember you too. I seldom forgit a person. . . . Of course, now you're married you can eat onions," he was not merely the Republican being familiar with the Royal Prince: he was doing what he would have done to the Head of his own State. Even a Republican English-

Goaks and Humour

man would probably have been slightly shocked by such irreverence. It was an American, again, who discovered that "the cow is an animal with four legs, one at each corner." As a scientific fact this, I need scarcely say, had been long known: but it took a new pair of eyes to see it precisely in this way.

A European of Mark Twain's abilities and position would scarcely have written his book about the Court of King Arthur. We have too many inhibitions. They are great and small. But the American habit of putting remarks in a whimsical, humorous form, whatever they are, and whatever the occasion, is so widespread that one often finds Americans of the most sober and humorless kind putting things humorously out of sheer force of national habit. An English employee, giving his employer notice, will either say that he cannot stand this — place any longer or else apologise in an embarrassed way for causing inconvenience. The American is more likely to come up with a normal expression and observe, "Say, Doc., if you know anybody who wants my job, he can have it." Everything is susceptible of humour; and the more extravagant the humour, the better. American humour is, strictly speaking, pervasive. The lecturer who announced on his programme that he was "compelled to charge one dollar for reserved seats, because oats, which two years ago cost 30 cents per bushel, now cost

Life and Letters

one dollar ; hay is also one dollar 75 cents per cwt., formerly 50 cents," was carrying his systematic high spirits into a place where few British entertainers would have thought of being funny. It all springs from the state of mind which led, some years ago, to the formation of Smile Clubs, institutions that no other people would have dreamed of. Jocosity is the best policy.

There is an American story about a man who invented a pneumatic life-saving device, to be attached to the body when jumping from a window during a fire. He announced an exhibition test. He sprang from the top of a sky-scraper, and then "he bounced and bounced and bounced until we had to shoot him to save him from death by starvation." There is another about a dispute between two fishermen as to the relative size of fish in their respective waters. Smaller fry having been catalogued, one man said that he once, when after very large tarpon, got a whale : to be met by the blasé repartee, "In my State, sir, we bait with whales." And there is another (where it comes from, I forget), about two brothers who went out hunting with two rifles and a single bullet, and brought the bullet home after killing a hundred head of buffalo. Their method was this. They were very crack shots, and they used to stand one on each side of the doomed beast. The bullet was fired by one brother, went through the

Goaks and Humour

victim, and was received by the muzzle of the other brother's rifle. An Englishman, hearing these stories, would know where they had come from. We can appreciate them, but we do not as a rule make them. We illustrate the qualities of men and things by telling lies about them, but we do not tell such thumping big ones. Our fishing stories are only slightly over the borders of the credible; a foolish person might be taken in by them: the American ones are such lies that narrators have no hope that even the most innocent will believe them. This obvious difference between the usual American and the usual English method of treating a thing humorously may be illustrated by examples. Ten years ago, or so, the London, Chatham and Dover Railway reached its nadir, and all British humorists were making jokes about the slowness of the trains. Some of these jokes were, for us, fairly drastic: the summit of achievement was reached, I think, by a report that a cow had met its death by charging an L.C.D. express from behind, and that the directors, at an emergency meeting, had decided to place cow-catchers at the *rear end* of all trains. But try to imagine what would have been said had the London, Chatham and Dover Railway been in America. The most luxuriant of our conceptions would have been feeble compared with the miracles of metaphor that would have been coined to show the extraordinary slowness of those trains.

Life and Letters

In American descriptions they would not have gone at a walking pace, they would not even have crawled at a snail's : at their fastest the snails would have overtaken them, and mostly they would positively have gone backwards so that passengers would be compelled, aiming at a certain destination, to board trains ostensibly proceeding in the opposite direction. Now I think of it, I do seem to remember something about a cow boarding a train and biting the passengers. This delight in giving the extra turn of the screw that destroys the last shred of verisimilitude for the sake of a fantastic effect is to be seen everywhere in American humorous writing, and one may take an illustration from the other side at random. Mr. Stephen Leacock's description of how he tried to borrow a match from a man in the street will do. The account throws light on a common experience, and the various stages of the man's struggle with his pockets and production of toothpicks and other articles from his coat-tails whilst his parcels fall all round, might have been done by an Englishman. But in the end he cannot help rounding it off by a piece of sheer gusto that would scarcely have occurred to anyone but an American. Full of compassion at the would-be match-lender's state of desperation, the author puts an end to his suffering by *throwing him under a tram*—that is to say, a "trolley-car." Mr. Leacock happens to be a Canadian

Goaks and Humour

and not a citizen of the United States. But in this regard they share the same tastes and the same habits.

In fact, as has been said ten thousand times before, they love Exaggeration. All little American communities in the old days had Characters of whom they were proud : and the Character was almost always an abnormal Exaggerator or Vituperator—which comes to the same thing. He was a man with a fine flow of the extravagant or the grotesque ; in other words, a Champion Liar. The pleasure that such artists take in their work is the pleasure of the fantastic embroiderer or the mediaeval carver of gargoyles. American essays in the Preposterous are of various sorts. Continually one gets the monstrously absurd simile, or the mild over-statement of a single fact. All American funny men make a practice of this. It usually becomes a habit with them ; they state everything in this form. Mark Twain's ordinary level is typified by "Twins amount to a permanent riot. And there isn't any real difference between triplets and an insurrection"—which is rather tired and mechanical.

O. Henry, a writer who is far more than a jester, was very good in this way. One may quote from his account of the Mayor who was lying ill in bed, with what seemed a grave stomachic complaint : "He was making internal noises that would have had everybody

Life and Letters

in San Francisco hiking for the parks." I suppose one is forced to explain, for the benefit of the forgetful British reader, that the population of San Francisco lives in dread of earthquakes. But the more admirable kind of invention is the impossibility upon a larger scale; the calculated and nicely-worked out mendacity which, in proportion to its gross incredibility, is worked out with the highest attainable degree of simplicity and gravity, the frankly absurd story which is told you as the state of the weather or your grandmother's health might be told you. In the perfection of this species we have, I think, the finest achievement of American humour.

Max Adeler's famous account of the poet who was engaged to write In Memoriam verses to go in the obituary column of the local paper and brought the mob of infuriated parents down upon the editor's head is an early approach to this style. It is monstrously impossible: but it is conducted with a considerable amount of restraint. Later authors have gone further in the self-suppression which eschews the incidental auctorial intervention or flamboyance of phrase, for the sake of the whole story. Mark Twain frequently did this sort of thing with great circumspection. For instance, the dialogue with the Chief of detectives in *The Stolen White Elephant*. The detective wants to know what the missing animal usually eats:

Goaks and Humour

“ ‘ Now, what does this elephant eat, and how much ? ’ ”

“ ‘ Well, as to *what* he eats—he will eat *anything*. He will eat a man, he will eat a Bible—he will eat anything *between* a man and a Bible.’ ”

“ ‘ Good—very good indeed, but too general. Details are necessary—details are the only valuable things in our trade. Very well—as to men. At one meal!—or, if you prefer, during one day—how many men will he eat, if fresh ? ’ ”

“ ‘ He would not care whether they were fresh or not ; at a single meal he would eat five ordinary men.’ ”

“ ‘ Very good ; five men ; we will put that down. What nationalities would he prefer ? ’ ”

“ ‘ He is indifferent about nationalities. He prefers acquaintances, but is not prejudiced against strangers.’ ”

“ ‘ Very good. Now as to Bibles. How many Bibles would he eat at a meal ? ’ ”

“ ‘ He would eat an entire edition.’ ”

“ ‘ It is hardly succinct enough. Do you mean the ordinary octavo, or the family illustrated ? ’ ”

“ ‘ I think he would be indifferent to illustrations ; that is, I think, he would not value illustrations above simple letter-press.’ ”

“ ‘ No, you do not get my idea. I refer to bulk. The ordinary octavo Bible weighs about two pounds and a half, while the great quarto

Life and Letters

with the illustrations weighs ten or twelve. How many Doré Bibles would he eat at a meal ?’

“ ‘ If you knew this elephant, you could not ask. He would take what they had.’

“ ‘ Well, put it in dollars and cents, then. We must get at it somehow. The Doré costs a hundred dollars a copy, Russian leather, bevelled.’

“ ‘ He would require about fifty thousand dollars’ worth—say an edition of five hundred copies.’

“ ‘ Now that is more exact. I will put that down. Very well ; he likes men and Bibles ; so far, so good.’ . . . ”

That is businesslike ; that is sober realism. Given the leading idea everything is related with complete propriety. The elaboration of it it was clearly a labour of love to its author.

A more modern instance is Mr. Ellis Parker Butler’s *Pigs is Pigs*, a short story which may or may not have been published in this country. A pair of guinea-pigs are transported from one town to another by an Express Delivery Company. An obstinate official insists in charging thirty cents a head on them, the rate for pigs ; an equally obstinate consignee refuses to pay more than the twenty-five cents due on pets. Pending agreement the guinea-pigs are left in the office. The man-in-charge writes to headquarters about it, and

Goaks and Humour

causes great bewilderment by mentioning two animals in his first letter, eight in his second, and 32 in his third. The struggle continues (an enormous bill for cabbage-leaves being run up) until the office is one large range of hutches and the guinea-pigs number very many thousands. The man has only to step (or rather creep, for there is little space) into the street for five minutes, and on his return he finds that there are a hundred more. This story is told with perfect composure: there is only one joke in it, and that is the whole story. The effect of this kind of thing is the effect of parody. It is parody of life and close to the humour of Butler's *Erewhon*. No one can equal the American humorist at it. The Americans—I use the word in the most complimentary sense—are the greatest liars in Creation.

Professor Leacock, in his essay upon American Humour says: "Essays upon American Humour after an initial effort towards the dignity and serenity of literary criticism, generally resolve themselves into the mere narration of American jokes and stories. The fun of these runs thinly towards its impotent conclusion, till the disillusioned reader detects behind the mask of the literary theorist the anxious grin of the secondhand story-teller." How untrue that is; and how unfair.

In order to get back on him for his gratuitous malice, I shall steal from his *Literary Lapses*

a final example of his great gift of making an idiot of himself. He sets himself to consider whether or not the bicycle is a nobler animal than the horse.

“I find that the difference between the horse and the bicycle is greater than I had supposed.

“The horse is entirely covered with hair; the bicycle is not entirely covered with hair, except the '89 model they are using in Idaho.

“In riding a horse the performer finds that the pedals in which he puts his feet will not allow of a good circular stroke. He will observe, however, that there is a saddle in which—especially while the horse is trotting—he is expected to seat himself from time to time. But it is simpler to ride standing up with the feet in the pedals.

“There are no handles to a horse, but the 1910 model has a string to each side of its face for turning its head when there is anything you want it to see.

“Coasting on a good horse is superb, but should be under control.”

I should like to hear Professor Freud's views on the hidden implications of this.

A CORNER OF OLD ENGLAND

IT has been maintained that war is indispensable because it teaches people geography. I will not discuss the merits or the defects of that doctrine here, and I freely admit that in August, 1914, I knew nothing of the situation of Brest-Litovsk or Bourlon Wood. But the illumination of war is only local, and, since I have to mention the Southern Appalachians, I had better explain what they are. They are a range of mountains, or, rather, an extensive mountain district running from the Pennsylvania border, through the Virginias, Kentucky, the Carolinas, and Tennessee into the northern parts of Georgia and Alabama. Here Mrs. O. D. Campbell and Mr. Cecil Sharp (to whom we owe the recovery of many of our old country songs) have been hunting for English Folk Songs. The results of their explorations are published by Messrs. Putnam ; the book is a romance.

The Southern Appalachian region is a large one, larger than Great Britain. Mr. Sharp has, therefore, covered as yet no more than small portions of it, chiefly in the " Laurel Country " of North Carolina. In that region he had

Life and Letters

experiences which, to an imaginative man, must have been as thrilling as anything that has ever happened to an explorer in Central Africa or Borneo. It is mountainous, thickly wooded, and very secluded. There are few roads, except mountain tracks; and scarcely any railroads. "Indeed, so remote and shut off from outside influence were, until quite recently, these sequestered mountain valleys that the inhabitants have for a hundred years or more been completely isolated and cut off from all traffic with the rest of the world." I suppose this is a slight exaggeration: that, for instance, these Arcadians, however fortunately sequestered, imported doctors, clothes, and tools. But one knows what Mr. Sharp means. Coming into their midst the travellers found themselves in a "pocket" of an old England which has disappeared. They found a strong, spare race; leisurely; easy and unaffected in their bearing, and with "the unself-conscious manners of the well-bred." They are mostly illiterate, and each family grows just what is needed to support life; but they are contented, quick-witted, and, in the truest sense, civilised. Their ancestors came, apparently, from the north of England; their religion is Calvinistic. Generations of freedom in America have undoubtedly modified some of their original characteristics. They drink and smoke very little and "commercial competition and social rivalries are unknown." But though in some

A Corner of Old England

regards they have customs peculiar to themselves, in others they are more faithful transmitters of old English tradition than are the English to-day :

“ Their speech is English, not American, and, from the number of expressions they use which have long been obsolete elsewhere and the old-fashioned way in which they pronounce many of their words, it is clear that they are talking the language of a past day, though exactly of what period I am not competent to decide.”

In that antique tongue they sing the old songs that their ancestors brought over from England in the time of George III. and perhaps still earlier. Here in England the folk-song collector always has to make straight for the Oldest Inhabitant. The young know few of the old songs, being supplied with music-hall songs from London and Berlin and rag-times from New York. In the Appalachians, where cosmopolitan music is unknown, the folk-song tradition is as strong in the young as in the aged, and Mr. Sharp has, on occasion, drawn what he wanted from small boys. There, in log-huts and farmsteads, hundreds of miles west of the Atlantic coast, on uplands lying between Philadelphia and St. Louis, he found this people strayed from the eighteenth century using such phrases as “ But surely you will tarry with us for the night,” and singing, with a total unconsciousness both of themselves and

Life and Letters

of their auditors, of woods and bowers, milk white steeds and dapple greys, lily-white hands, silver cups, the Northern Sea, London Bridge, and the gallows. He heard from these mountain singers *The Golden Vanity*, *The Cherry Tree Carol*, *Lord Randal*, *The Wife of Usher's Well*, *Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight*, and scores of less well known ballads and songs, versions of which the collectors have for years been painfully picking up in Sussex, Somersetshire, Yorkshire, and Cornwall. It is a strange reflection that, had we left it a little later, we might have had to go to America for old folk music which had been totally lost on English soil.

Mr. Sharp does not make it quite clear which of his songs are hitherto altogether unrecorded ; he includes several ballads not in Child's collection, but Child may have deliberately rejected them and they may have appeared elsewhere. Remarkably, he got no ritual songs, songs associated with harvest home, morris and sword dances, or the coming of English spring and the primroses. His hundred and twenty-two texts include only one carol and few songs touching on religion. The English rituals were not transplanted ; the festivals died out ; the doctrines of the mountaineers deprecated dancing ; and the spring of their new country was not the spring of their old. They are strongest in ballads, and in songs (like *Shooting of His Dear*) with

A Corner of Old England

stories in them, which things lose nothing by transplantation across a hemisphere; and the songs are still living in the old way, growing and changing with the whims and memories of individual singers, yet always retaining the essential kernel. Nearly all the tunes are in "gapped scales," scales with only five or six notes to the octave; as always with folk song they are predominantly melancholy, and many of them are exceedingly beautiful.

That Mr. Sharp's texts—or indeed those of folk songs as a whole—are in the bulk great poetry I will not maintain. At its least polished the folk song sinks to the level of this (sung by Mrs. Tom Rice, at Big Laurel, West Carolina):

*They hadn't been laying in bed but one hour
When he heard the trumpet sound.
She cried out with a thrilling cry:
O Lord, O Lord, I'm ruined.*

This, possibly, is a corruption of something originally a little more rounded; a process similar to that which works upon all folk songs and which (in the Appalachian versions of *The Golden Vanity*) gives the name of that good ship variously as the Weeping Willow Tree and the Golden Willow Tree, and provides a sister ship with the names of Golden Silverree and Turkey Silverree, which might strike even an Appalachian as an odd name for a vessel.

Life and Letters

We do not know in folk songs, as a rule, what is "original" and what is not; usually there has been so much accretion that there can hardly be said to be an "original" at all. The process is not productive of great verse, comparable with the masterpieces of form produced by poets with surnames, fountain pens and identifiable tombstones, though often there is a poignancy about individual lines and stanzas which makes them very effective even when divorced from their exquisite tunes, which are the real triumphs of folk-production. Mr. Sharp's American collection is certainly not, textually, superior to the English collections. But it does contain some fine things. It must have been queer to listen to *The True Lover's Farewell* coming from the lips of a woman in the American backwoods:

*O fare you well my own true love,
So fare you well for a while,
I'm going away, but I'm coming back
If I go ten thousand mile.*

*If I prove false to you, my love,
The earth may melt and burn,
The sea may freeze and the earth may burn
If I no more return.*

*Ten thousand miles, my own true love,
Ten thousand miles or more;
The rocks may melt and the sea may burn
If I never no more return.*

A Corner of Old England

*And who will shoe your pretty little feet,
Or who will glove your hand,
Or who will kiss your red rosy cheek
While I'm in the foreign land?*

*My father will shoe my pretty little feet,
My mother will glove my hand,
And you can kiss my red rosy cheek
When you return again.*

*O don't you see yon little turtle dove,
A-skipping from vine to vine
A-mourning the loss of its own true love
Just as I mourn for mine?*

*Don't you see yon pretty girl
A-spinning on yonder wheel?
Ten thousand gay, gold guineas would I give
To feel just like she feels.*

The end lets one down with a jerk ; but the construction is perfect.

A POET'S PEDIGREE

MY eye was caught by a controversy in the Saturday *Westminster*. A reviewer had "characterised" as "a misleading statement" somebody's allegation that the poet Shelley "came of an ancient county family." It is the commonest of observations that it was the strangest thing in the world that so imaginative, phantasmal, revolutionary a being as Shelley should have sprung from "a line of heavy country squires." Commentators always assume that the inheritor from such ancestors should live up to Charles Churchill's description of "some tenth transmitter of a foolish face." There was nothing surprising, therefore, in the fact that an indignant correspondent wrote in to dispute what the reviewer had said and to question his authority. The critic answered by referring his antagonist to John Addington Symonds's book on Shelley. It is there stated that Sir Bysshe Shelley, the poet's grandfather, "was born in North America and began life, as it is said, as a quack doctor." "Began life" is not a very good way of putting it; one is reminded of the frequent merchant prince

A Poet's Pedigree

who has "come into the world without a penny in his pocket." But the meaning is clear, and Symonds goes on to say that Sir Bysse was an adventurer who "succeeded in winning the hands and fortunes of two English heiresses." So the reviewer, whilst prepared to admit that the American Shelleys were members of the Sussex family, sticks to what is material in his point.

The ancient and illustrious ancestry of the Sussex Shelleys is not a matter of dispute. A person of their name, or something near enough to it to entitle—or, at least, to encourage—a family claim, came over with that well-attended man the Conqueror and appears on the Roll of Battle Abbey. Another Sir Guyon de Shelley was a Crusader, and a Crusader of the first water. He it was who adopted the family coat. He hung three great conches or shells behind his shield. Each of these had miraculous properties. A blast blown on one scattered foes like chaff; the sound of another would drive away the devil; and the third was reputed to have the power of compelling any woman to succumb to Sir Guyon's charms. How this is known is not clear, for we are told that he was far too upright a man ever to use it. And it is to be presumed that he exercised a similar self-control with regard to the others; or, thus munitioned, he would certainly have gone farther in the world than he did. If it

be contended that there is something mythical about Sir Guyon, who might have been the original of Sir Huon of Bordeaux, no such question can arise about the sixteenth-century Sir R. Shelley, who was Grand Prior of the Knights of Malta. His descendant, Sir John Shelley, of Maresfield, was a baronet of the original 1611 creation. It will be remembered that James I., who wanted money, invited and even compelled men of substance to become baronets for £1000 apiece, thus affording modern practitioners an ancient precedent. This man had two sons—Sir William, a judge of Common Pleas, and Edward. From Edward sprang Timothy, who, as Medwin says, “had two sons, and settled—having married an American lady—at Christ’s Church, Newark, in North America; where Bysshe was born, on the 21st June, 1731.” This Bysshe was Sir Bysshe, Percy Bysshe, Shelley’s grandfather.

We may presume that the pedigree—which Mr. Buxton Forman gives—is sound, though there is often some doubt about pedigrees which have an American break in them. But there is no doubt that if it be supposed that a “freak” like Shelley ought to have some unusual ancestor to inherit from Sir Bysshe is quite good enough. There is no need to go to so recent an authority as Symonds; for he and other modern writers go back to the foolish but racy Medwin for their authority.

A Poet's Pedigree

The transatlantic Bysshe, says Medwin, "exercised the profession of a quack doctor and married, it is said, the widow of a miller, but for this I cannot vouch." Dowden, who likes to tone down anything derogatory, even about Shelley's grandfather, refers to "rumours of some dim American bride," but says that Bysshe "must have made haste in wooing and wedding and burying his transatlantic wife, if ever she had existence," for he was not more than twenty-one when he married his second wife. But as the poet himself definitely states in a letter of 1812 that his grandfather "acted very ill to three wives," we may reasonably take it that the miller's widow existed, "in some shape or other."

Before he was twenty-one, Bysshe Shelley had renounced quackery, buried (we must assume) his American wife, come to England, and, in Medwin's words, "captivated the great heiress of Horsham, the only daughter and heiress of the Rev. Theobald Michell." Her guardian forbade the marriage, so the couple eloped and "were wedded in that convenient asylum for lovers, the Fleet, by the Fleet parson." Having borne him three children (including Timothy, the poet's father), this wife died, within a few years, of smallpox. Medwin's possibly prejudiced account of the sequel begins: "After his wife's death, an insatiate fortune-hunter, he laid siege to a second heiress in an adjoining county. In order

Life and Letters

to become acquainted with her, he took up his abode for some time in a small inn on the verge of the Park at Penshurst." The lady was Miss Sidney Pery, and again there was an elopement; it suggests that he had at least a great superficial fascination and that he had not been a quack doctor for nothing. Late in life, Bysshe Shelley was given a baronetcy in order that his electioneering interest might be secured for the Whigs. He became a great miser, and "his manner" (Medwin again) "of life was most eccentric, for he used to frequent daily the tap-room of one of the low inns at Horsham, and there drank with some of the lowest citizens, a habit he had probably acquired in the New World." His life was very prolonged, and his son is alleged to have obtained daily bulletins of his health, though we may doubt this. Two of his daughters eloped as he had done, and he cut them out of his will. The good Professor Dowden's allusions to him are very taking. He calls him "a gentleman of the old school, with a *dash*" [my italics] "of New World cleverness, push, and mammon-worship." "Stately old Sir Bysshe," proceeds the professor, "impressed the townsfolk as melancholy; perhaps said they, he was 'crossed in love' in his youth." Sir Bysshe may have been libelled by Medwin, but it is absurd to be sentimental about him. Dowden, summarising his achievements, says that "he achieved greatness by bold and

A Poet's Pedigree

dexterous strokes." Bold and dexterous, indeed!

This, as Froude said of the Saint, is "all and more than all, that is known" of Shelley's American grandfather. It may fairly be argued by those who attach importance to such matters, that, whatever the ultimate descent in the male line may be, the statement that Shelley sprang from a line of Sussex squires requires qualification, as it were, both in spirit and in matter. For most of us, we are not greatly disturbed by such questions. We let the genealogists, and the biologists, and the sociologists arouse themselves with them, but we should be quite as prepared to see Shelley springing from a line of greengrocers as from a line of buccaneers. What porridge had John Keats? why that lapse into classicism on the part of a livery-stable keeper's son? Where did Blake get his wildness from; where did William Morris get his; whence came the volcanic turbulence of Mr. Alfred Noyes? Not, as far as I know, from father or grandfather. Genius appears anywhere, and we should have no sound reason for surprise had Shelley sprung, as an eminent, but too precise, modern is said to have done, from "a long line of maiden aunts."

On the other hand, if we *must* look for unusual people in an unusual man's pedigree, whose pedigree—and remember both female and male descents count in this matter—is free

Life and Letters

from them? It is always assumed in such arguments that any kind of "unusualness" will do. Madness and genius are allied; and so, argue the school of Rougon-Macquart, are artistic power, boldness in swindling, excess in vice. Which of us, if he goes back a few generations on both sides, cannot find an ancestor sufficiently eccentric or sufficiently degenerate to serve quite adequately as an ancestor for Shakespeare himself?

RABELAIS

IT is observed by Rabelais himself that those who have read “the pleasant titles of some books of our invention,” such as *Pease and Bacon with a Commentary*, “are too ready to judge that there is nothing in them but jests, mockeries, lascivious discourse, and recreative lies”; but “the subject thereof is not so foolish as by the title at the first sight it should appear to be.” Were one not faced with incitements to speculation about meaning on every page, this would be sufficient excuse for the commentators and explorers. But these gentlemen would do well to remember a later remark of the author’s about “a certain gulligut friar and true bacon-picker” who tried to get incredible allegories out of Ovid :

“If you give no credit thereto, why do not you the same in these jovial new chronicles of mine? Albeit when I did dictate them, I thought upon no more than you, who possibly were drinking the whilst as I was. For in the composing of this lordly book, I never lost nor bestowed any more, nor any other time than what was appointed to serve me for taking of

Life and Letters

my bodily refection, that is, whilst I was eating and drinking. And indeed, that is the fittest and most proper hour wherein to write these high matters and deep sciences; as Homer knew very well, the paragon of all philologues, and Ennius, the father of the Latin poets, as Horace calls him, although a certain sneaking jobbernal alleged that his verses smelled more of the wine than oil."

An accusation which Rabelais calls "an honour and a praise."

Our ancestors tended to regard Rabelais as purely a buffoon. Their imaginary portraits of him were much like their portraits of Falstaff. Modern research has recovered a good many details of his industrious life, and shown how vast is the learning and how purposeful much of the satire of his great book. It has even been decided that the only portrait with the slightest claim to authenticity is one which gives him weary eyes, sunken cheeks, a wispy beard, and a forehead like a ploughed field. Some of the results of the immense mass of modern French investigation are tabulated in Mr. W. F. Smith's *Rabelais in His Writings*, published by the Cambridge University Press, and Mr. Smith makes a good many conjectures of his own. Among his arguments some are not exactly conclusive. It is not very satisfying to be told that Rabelais was not, as used to be supposed, born in 1483; he was always

286

Rabelais

exact about facts, and we can (we are told) deduce with certainty from his own writings that he was born in 1494, "about 1494 or 1495," or else in 1489. It is not much use to know that his statements of facts were accurate when you don't know which were his statements of facts. But his history has been very much amplified; we know where he went and when he wrote much better than we did; and the nature of his reading and references is being gradually cleared up. In one regard, at least, the tendency of modern students is significant. When research on him began, the inclination was to read great affairs into his every chapter. It is now certain that the war between Grandgousier and Picrochole represents nothing more than a law-suit between Rabelais' father (who is no longer alleged to have been an inn-keeper as the robust old tradition had it) and a neighbouring landlord over riparian rights. But the point to remember (in the light of the introduction to *Gargantua*, if our own sense doesn't guide us) is that the raw material of Rabelais ceases to be important after he has used it. He may have amused himself as much as he liked by using real characters, incidents, and events in his narrative, but the fairy-tale he made out of them is the thing that matters. The war between those two kings was not written merely in order to record this insignificant law-suit; when Friar John

Life and Letters

of the Funnels, "by his prowess and valour discomfited all those of the army that entered into the close of the abbey, unto the number of thirteen thousand, six hundred, twenty and two, besides the women and little children, which is always to be understood," Rabelais had forgotten all about the fishing rights of Rabelais *père* and was merely thinking of his own amusement and perhaps of the grinning faces of his hospital patients, for whose amusement the first two books are alleged to have been written.

The scholars must not, in fact, begin to make him smell more of the oil than of the wine. They have demonstrated that he was not a drunkard—though anyone with half an eye could see that; but they now tend to suggest rather that he was a teetotaler. They prove that he was an eminent physician, a successful lecturer, a trusted diplomatist, an erudite theologian, a great Humanist, a Church reformer, a linguist, a lawyer, a traveller, an expert in architecture and the military art, and Lord knows what else; and they almost lose sight of the fact that, whatever else he was, he was a jolly old dog. Here, for instance, is Mr. Smith, who has patience, judgment, learning, and who certainly would not be spending his life upon such an author if he did not relish him. Yet his book is completely humourless, lacking in high spirits or even relish, and unilluminated even by the quota-

288

Rabelais

tions from the text which might give balance to it. One cannot help thinking that if the spirit of Rabelais himself, looking down from the clouds over the lid of a tankard of nectar, should descry these books on the work which he dedicated with a "Ho! Ye most illustrious drinkers," he would be tempted to add a few more items to that long catalogue of imaginary pedantry with which he filled his Library of St. Victor, and which includes *Quaestio subtilissima, utrum chimaera in vacuo bombinans possit comedere secundas intentiones*, and *Marmotretus de baboonis et apis, cum Commento Dorbellis*.

In fact, after I had read Mr. Smith's book—closely reasoned, carefully arranged, clearly expressed, as it is—I had to go back to Rabelais and read a few remembered passages in order to remind myself that neither reform nor autobiographical history were his prime interest. I read of that storm during which Panurge, as white as chalk, chattered, "Be, be, be, bous, bous, bous." I read the debate on Marrying or not Marrying, and the Discourse of the Drinkers, the finest reproduction of the chatter of a crowd enjoying themselves which exists anywhere in literature. I read the great formal address wherewith Master Janotus de Bragmardo besought Gargantua to return to the people of Paris the bells of Our Lady's Church which he had carried off on the neck of his mare, and which opens :

Life and Letters

“Hem, hem, gud-day, sire, gud-day. Et vobis, my masters. It were but reason that you should restore to us our bells; for we have great need of them. Hem, hem, aihfuhash. We have oftentimes heretofore refused good money for them of those of London in Cahors, yea, and those of Bordeaux in Brie, who would have bought them for the substantific quality of the elementary complexion, which is intronificated on the terrestreity of their quidditative nature, to extraneize the blasting mists and whirlwinds upon our vines, indeed not ours, but these round about us.”

And I read that most perfect chapter of all “of the qualities and conditions of Panurge,” who “was of a middle stature, not too high nor too low, and had somewhat of an aquiline nose, made like the handle of a razor,” who was “naturally subject to a kind of disease which at that time they called lack of money,” and who “was a wicked lewd rogue, a cozener, drinker, roister, rover, and a very dissolute and debauched fellow, if there were any in Paris; otherwise, and in all matters else, the best and most virtuous man in the world.” And, having thus read, I felt sure again that although it is interesting to know that the idea of Panurge came out of an Italian macaronic romance, and probably out of fifty-seven other places as well, it really does not greatly matter; any more than that “fair

290

Rabelais

great book ” which Panurge wrote, but which “ is not printed yet that I know of.”

Still, it is ridiculous not to be thankful for the book one will use. This is especially so when, in England, Rabelaisian literature is so scarce. No English biographer has thought it worth while to write a really big book on him ; and beyond Professor Saintsbury (who had a magnificent chapter on him in his recent *History of the French Novel*) and two industrious Cambridge dons, scarcely any living English critic has attempted to do him justice. He is not even widely read ; except by school-boys who get hold of nasty paper-covered editions of him because he was in the habit of plastering his pages with unpleasant, and, in print, unusual words. He cannot be excused—as some have attempted to excuse him—from the charge of a verbal coarseness unparalleled in any other great modern writer. But his gigantic humour, his inexhaustibly happy language, his knowledge of mankind, his wisdom, and the generosity of his spirit, have made him the secular Bible of a succession of English writers (amongst whom, a little surprisingly, was Charles Kingsley), and there are many men living who would find him equally companionable if only they would once try him. They need not even bother about reading him in the original. For the seventeenth century translation by Sir Thomas Urquhart of Cromartie (concluded, not quite so

Life and Letters

superbly, by Peter Motteux) is one of the great translations of the world, unequalled by any other translation in our language, a miracle in its constant re-creation of what cannot be literally rendered from the French into our own tongue.

FAME AFTER DEATH

I HAVE been reading an author unduly neglected. There are many. Our literature is full of minor classics which from time to time are galvanised into life by new editions, and then relapse into almost complete oblivion, a few bookish people cherishing them and no one else mentioning them. These resent the neglect. They feel that injustice is being done if a favourite book is omitted from histories of literature or is unknown to people who would appreciate it. And there is no doubt that the injustice is felt as an injustice to the author personally, though he be long dead and unaware of men's speech and their silence. This feeling springs unconsciously, perhaps, from the knowledge that if a man writes a good book one of his main motives, almost always, is posthumous fame. He wishes his name and his personality to survive him ; posterity must think well of him ; it must know that a man lived who was fully up to its own best standards, a man intellectually as acute, emotionally as quick, morally as sound as the latest births of time. " I think," said the dying Keats, " that I shall

Life and Letters

be among the English poets after I die"; "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments of princes," wrote Shakespeare, "shall outlast this powerful rhyme." The predictions indicate the prepossessions. We still see through their eyes and feel with their hearts, find ourselves in them and them in ourselves. But posthumous fame is not always of this quality; and the neglect we spoke of is not the only kind of neglect.

For, thinking of those authors whose names are kept but dimly and intermittently alive, of those books (not of the first order) in the survival or revival of which chance seems so notably to operate, I thought of those whose names survive detached from their works, or of whom the names are universally respected whilst the works are generally ignored. There are Anglo-Saxon poets, Caedmon and Cynewulf, whose names come easy to the lips of all literate men; but who reads them save an occasional editor and an infrequent examinee? Langland, of *Piers Plowman*, is another such. He is universally regarded as our greatest writer before Chaucer, but how many times a year does anybody open his book, and how many of those who would never omit him from any list of the illustrious dead, are in contact with him or have any first-hand basis for their belief in his greatness? Writing of Chaucer's successors, the late Churton Collins, a candid if a narrow man, remarked that "What Voltaire said of

Fame after Death

Dante is literally true of such poets as Henryson, Douglas, and Dunbar. We simply take them on trust." And there are a great many others whom most of us take on trust. It would be foolish to suggest that no one ever reads the *Faerie Queen* through, and we know that from time to time Spenser, the great artist, has profoundly affected the art of his successors. But what proportion of those who put him amongst the four greatest of our poets habitually read his masterpiece, or, in fact, have ever read it at all? How many who mechanically do reverence to his name are secretly of opinion that his works are extremely dull? Is he read in England any more than Confucius is? And in some degree does not this divorce between fame and familiarity, this existence of established and unchallenged reputation which is also mainly untested, affect also such great figures as Ben Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Dryden, and such lesser ones as Richardson and Jeremy Taylor? They are labelled; they have, after whatever early vicissitudes, been put on their respective shelves, and scholars provide the general public with the facts about them and the justifications for their position. But Spenser does not live as Shelley lives, nor Dryden as Jane Austen. The range of their personal access is far narrower than that of their celebrity. In the farthest extremity, there survive from classical times illustrious names

Life and Letters

to which no works are attached at all; they are spoken of with respect; they must not be missed out on any account; but we know nothing of the men beyond their names. And this, which is an uncommon occurrence in the sphere of literature, is in other spheres common; for our dim and inchoate early records have handed down to us the names of thousands of monarchs and warriors who meant to leave their marks on the world, whose names do reverberate through the ages, and of whom we know nothing more. What was Sennacherib like? What, beyond their names, did Hengist and Horsa leave behind them? And, dreaming of that posthumous life which is so usual a human ambition, would they have been satisfied to know that they would survive only in a mere verbal repetition of the names they bore?

Probably they would have preferred that to nothing. This passion is beyond reason. Reason tells us that time is long and eternity longer, that all civilisations pass, and that in the end all records fade. We cannot, looking ahead, visualise millions of years of accumulated reputations. Old fames must die as new fames grow, and accident may wipe them out with more than normal rapidity. "What poets sang in Atlantis?" asks a modern poet. We know what they must have felt, but we do not know who they were; and the tidal wave that suddenly submerged that

296

Fame after Death

fabled continent is but a violent and abrupt symbol of the decay and oblivion that ultimately must overcome all the works of men. We may be as established as we think. We may at last have driven firm piles in that morass into which past civilisations have constantly relapsed. The last of the barbarian invasions may be over; our scientific fabric may not, within thinkable time, collapse; the ordered progress of the Victorian vision may be ahead and may last through aeons. But even so—and it is a large postulate—the vessel's wake cannot indefinitely be kept in sight. There will be a horizon to each age, beyond which the knowledge and interest of details far behind will fade. They will have new Shakespeares and new Spensers; our sonnets will have gone like our marble and the gilded monuments of our princes, beyond the range even of archaeologists. And in the end what prospect does reason, working on the supposed facts that are now provided her, offer? A cooling and a disappearance. A void and frozen world circling in space, and a watching moon that has outlasted all mortal fames and seen the ultimate Shakespeare pass and die, leaving no more permanent trace than Hodge at his plough or the slaves that worked on the pyramids. We know all that, yet knowing it makes no difference. For fame after death, however uncertain and however perishable, men will work, starve, and bear

Life and Letters

with cheerfulness the neglect of their contemporaries; in the last resort they are content that for some term, the limits of which they shrink from contemplating, the mere syllables of their names should be known and spoken, like the names of schoolboys cut on desks or the initials of lovers on trees. Is it strange that the meditative, contemplating so peculiar a phenomenon, should have found in this mania, otherwise so stupid and perverse, the inexplicable reflection of a deep consciousness of immortality?



PR
6037
Q5L5
1920
cop.2

Squire, (Sir) John Collings
Life and letters

PLEASE DO NOT REMOVE
CARDS OR SLIPS FROM THIS POCKET

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARY

